

Under the gun (so you take it on the run) by Ludovico_is_my_homeboy

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

The brat prince of the Hargrove criminal empire meets an unassuming art teacher at his little sister's school. Little do they realize that they are both playing with fire...

Mob boss Billy / Teacher Steve AU, inspired by tumblr, now with added outtakes (more fluff, more smut!)

1. The night is calling, I have to go

“I heard her family are all gangsters.”

“What?”

“It’s true! Frank Bishop in 4A said that his brother told him that the Hargroves are the biggest crime family in the city.”

“Frank Bishop,” Lucas says with some authority, “is a dickhead.”

“Well, yeah,” Dustin is forced to agree with that assessment. Frank Bishop in classroom 4A was widely known as a notorious dickhead. “That doesn’t mean he’s wrong, though.”

“Who’s not wrong?” Will Byers asks as he sidles up to where Lucas and Dustin are walking in to Hawkins Prep School.

“Where’s Mike?” Lucas asks.

“Right behind me, he had to get his notebook from Nancy. Who’s not wrong?”

“Frank Bishop,” Dustin supplies.

“Frank Bishop is a dickhead,” Mike interrupts, running to finally catch up with the group. “What are we talking about?”

“The new girl,” Dustin supplies.

“New girl?” Lucas scoffs. “She’s been here for like three months now!”

“What new girl?”

“Max Hargrove!”

“Mike hasn’t noticed her,” Lucas says, his voice getting high-pitched in a way that can only mean trouble. “Mike can’t stop mooning over El. Mike’s in looove!”

“Shut up!”

"Better not let Hopper catch you, Mike!"

“Mike and El, sitting in a tree...” Dustin chimes in, picking up the thread. “K-I-S-S-I-N...”

“Boys!”

The four boys jump in surprise and consternation, but they recognize the voice immediately and know that they are safe. It’s their favorite teacher, the one who would never, ever get them into trouble.

“Shouldn’t you be in homeroom?” he asks, knowing full well that they should be – after all, he’s head of their homeroom class.

“Yes, Mr. Harrington,” the boys groan good-naturedly.

“Better scoot. Come on, let’s move it. Can’t be late for my own class.”

The boys frog-march into classroom 6B, their teacher cradling a mug of coffee (helpfully labelled ‘World’s #1 Teacher’ in colorful lettering) and following behind them.

Steve sits in the Hawkins Prep auditorium, midway back in the cheap seats with his microphone in his hand and his eyes glued on the stage and a script for a play dubiously entitled “The Wonders of the Human Body” open on his lap. As he waits and watches and tries not to doze off in front of his students he considers the possibility that there are some very good reasons why there are rules against teachers dating the family members of their students.

Well... he’s not dating Mr. Hargrove. Dating implies courtship and conversations that last more than five minutes at a throw. He’s not technically breaking that rule.

“I am the mighty cobra!” a voice boom from the stage. “The powerhouse of the cell!”

“Mitochondria!”

Steve sighs in his seat as Dustin yells the word from his perch off-stage where he is shaking his open script in frustration. Liza Benton, fourth grader, goes beet-red as she stands in her costume in the limelight of the auditorium. Two weeks of rehearsals and she hasn't gotten that line right once.

Her friend Rebecca, making her stage debut as a red blood cell, dissolves into nervous giggles and Steve curses Principal Hopper yet again for talking him into running this year's school drama production.

“Liza, honey,” Steve uses his best ‘patient teacher’ voice, clicking on the microphone in front of him so she can hear him. “It's Mitochondria. If you're not sure look at Dustin before you say the line and he'll remind you.”

He can hear Dustin groan loudly off-stage but decides to ignore it. Dustin is quite cranky that he's the line-prompter instead of an on-stage presence for this play, but after The Great Curtain Debacle of last semester's production Steve thought it prudent to employ the boy's talents elsewhere.

“Okay, let's go again guys.”

Maxine Hargrove, in the role of “The Scientist/Narrator”, clears her throat and repeats the scene's opening line in a pained voice: “The body is a wondrous work of art...”

As she works her way through her lines, all correct and more or less audible, Steve follows his earlier train of thought.

No, he's not dating Billy Hargrove. And technically there is no rule against fucking your student's older brother in an art supply closet during parent-teacher conference night. That right there is so obviously a gross violation of the professional code of conduct that it didn't even need to be written down in the rule book.

Steve could chalk it up to being a new teacher, to having just moved to town, to boredom or frustration or just straight up terrible

decision-making. Either way, there was probably a very good reason why he shouldn't have fucked Billy Hargrove in a supply closet.

To be fair it had almost not been a conscious decision. He'd been sitting at his desk waving Mrs. Henderson out the door. She'd brought him cookies and he'd showed her Dustin's art project. Steve taught several classes at Hawkins Prep, but he was technically head art teacher for the lower grades, a role which made him something of a non-teacher, a fun teacher. He liked that, and he loved art, and he liked that Dustin had built a monster out of paper-mache for his art project, and he'd told Mrs. Henderson so. She was so pleased, and Steve had been riding a nice warm bubble of contentment.

Then Billy Hargrove walked in and Steve immediately stuck his foot in it.

"You're a little young," he said, not realizing he'd blurted that out loud until Hargrove's mouth quirked up and Maxine, half a step behind him, let out a low groan of annoyance.

"He's my brother," Maxine helpfully supplied in a tone that clearly suggested that Steve was the worst kind of idiot. "He's 24. My dad couldn't come."

"Wait outside," Mr. Hargrove barked, not even looking at his sister. He gave Steve a wide shark grin and took his seat, legs spread wide, across from Steve's desk.

What followed was a whirlwind of innuendos that turned Steve red with embarrassment as he gamely tried to work his way through explaining Max's grades. He still had no idea how he'd managed to inform Billy of Max's solid English and Math skills and her trouble with Biology with a straight face, and he'd breathed a sigh of relief when that golden god with his muscles and his smirk and his gorgeous hair and his bright eyes finally took pity on him and left.

He thought that was the end of it until he finished his conferences and went to lock up his classroom. As he turned from the door strong hands grabbed him by the lapels and pushed him against the wall, and suddenly a hot, searching mouth was on his.

He knew immediately that it was Hargrove. He'd been shocked and thrown but he'd known – God, he smelled so good, his facial hair scraping against Steve's lips, his hands roaming, demanding, commanding. Steve had needed to think quickly when he heard Hopper's unmistakable huffing one hallway over, and had dragged them both into a nearby supply closet that was never kept locked.

Even now, weeks after the fact, Steve was still sure everyone could read the lust and guilt on his face when he remembered how Billy pushed up Steve's shirt and bit him – *BIT him!* – bruising his chest before shoving his hands down his pants. He'd carried the marks for days after that night and caught himself on more than one occasion absentmindedly rubbing at his chest afterwards, feeling the tell-tale soreness and blushing at the memory.

He was so very grateful at this moment that he was alone and in the dark in his auditorium seat.

Up on the stage Terry Taylor has lost his prop and the production screeches to a halt as Dustin runs out to help him look for it. Steve holds back a groan and shouts up that Terry's prop has fallen behind a set-piece – no, not there, Dustin, over there... where I'm pointing! – where it is quickly retrieved by Will Byers, who is helping paint one of the backdrops. The kids sort themselves out and the rehearsal resumes.

If Steve closes his eyes and thinks about it, he can still remember the taste of Billy's cum.

There is a very good reason why Steve shouldn't be doing this. Maybe if it had been a one-off – but that tryst in the closet had not been the only one. Far from it. Again, and again, after play practices, after school, always here in the same building, always so good and sexy and amazing that Steve thought he'd lose his mind... and yet all of it never quite enough, all of it a holding pattern... all of it fine until the day Steve had opened his mouth and then Billy ruined it and now here they are...

They aren't dating.

He never should have started this. In fact, he's completely distracted

from his actual work because he's pretty sure Billy Hargrove is going to walk through the doors behind him any minute, just in time to pick Maxine up from play practice.

He has also pretty much decided that he never wants to see Billy Hargrove again. Not after last time.

Liza gets 'mitochondria' wrong again and Steve resolves to make up cue cards when he gets home tonight.

They aren't dating. That's a given.

Billy lets his eyes drift away from the road in front of him to the rear-view mirror. There's a swipe of red on his right cheek just under his eye that's going to turn into the most terrific bruise in a little while.

A 'backtalk' bruise. Billy has taken to categorizing them when he gets them, which is often.

There are 'backtalk' bruises and 'Billy fucked up' bruises and 'Neil was annoyed' bruises and 'work' bruises and 'sexy fun-time' bruises. This one on his cheek was a 'backtalk' bruise, a smack across the face that had sent Billy half way across Neil's office.

At least they had been alone this time. It was worse when smacks and slaps and bruises happened in front of the advisors and soldiers that made up the Hargrove Family criminal empire. Worse when he was humiliated in front of the men.

Regardless, Neil's point had been made. Billy would go out tonight and collect either a check or a pound of flesh from a reluctant ex-client. He'd cancel his date with whatever whore it was this week (but he didn't have a date planned, he wasn't going to go out, that wasn't why he didn't want to do this... but he hadn't had the opportunity to say that, and it wouldn't have mattered anyway...) and he'd go take care of business.

Tonight. Without delay. Come home with the money or with bruised

and bloodied knuckles. No third option.

The light changes and Billy guns his classic Camaro and continues to make his way towards Hawkins Prep. He drops Maxine off and picks her up from school every day. He's the only one Neil trusts enough to do it. Billy should maybe take that as a compliment, a sign of trust, an affirmation... but in reality, it just makes him feel like an errand boy.

If he wasn't always having to act as a replacement parent for Max, Billy would never have met Steve Harrington.

Steve Harrington.

Mr. Harrington.

The awkward, sweet, bumbling art teacher. Glasses and cozy looking sweaters hiding beautiful big doe-eyes and pale, mole-marked skin. A lean, long body that made Billy's fingers twitch, eager to touch and claim.

Cock-sucking lips. A gorgeous ass. Salty-sweet cum. A low, whimpering moan he makes that sounds like he's falling apart in Billy's hands.

A gentle, self-deprecating laugh. A small, kind, knowing smile. Ink and paint on his hands, chalk dust on his shirts, a mug of half-finished coffee on his desk.

True concern and care for his kids... *his* kids, Billy's heard him call his students. Like they actually do belong to him, like they are his joy and not his job.

Steve Harrington.

They aren't dating.

Billy Hargrove doesn't date.

Ask anyone in this city and they'll tell you why.

Billy Hargrove is the brat-prince of this town. Its monstrous playboy.

Its beautiful, deadly villain. The son of Neil Hargrove. A master of booze and women and dope and gambling. You want it, you need to pay the Hargroves. You cross them and it's two in your chest, one in your melon.

Billy Hargrove doesn't date.

He fucks. He fights. He kills. He intimidates. He smokes. He drinks. He drives. He destroys.

He doesn't date.

And he definitely doesn't date *guys*.

But it's come to Billy's attention, just a little bit too late, that Steve Harrington isn't from this city. He's belatedly done his research and realized that Steve Harrington only moved here at the beginning of the current school year, a mere six months before Maxine transferred in to Hawkins Prep.

Steve Harrington doesn't know who the Hargroves are.

Steve Harrington doesn't know that Billy doesn't date.

That's probably why a few weeks ago, after the latest in a series of quick, passionate, filthy, beautiful, random couplings, Steve had looked at him from where he was slouched against a desk, his lips swollen, his voice wrecked, his shirt open, his hair a mess. That's probably why Steve had opened his mouth and asked if they could go out sometime.

He had actually said that. "Do you want to go out sometime?"

None of this would have happened if Billy had just said no...

Billy had not said no.

He had said yes and accepted Steve's number and left, and only when he was in his car again had he realized that there was no way that Billy Hargrove was ever going to date Steve Harrington. They could fuck, sure, Billy's had guys before (quietly, always quietly, not quite a secret but also never in the open) ... and as he sat there, he had

hatched a plan that would show the shy little teacher how this was going to work.

For their first not-date, Billy took Steve out to his favorite Hargrove Family owned and operated strip club – The Hurricane.

Billy was in his element. Girls dripping with lace and sequins strutted around in a dazzling array of color, each more beautiful and less covered than the last, dispensing liquor and champagne to all, the music booming loudly in the background.

All of it Billy's. His kingdom.

And across from him sat the teacher. He wasn't wearing his glasses, which made Billy wonder what exactly he needed them for, and he had traded his sweater for a button up shirt and nice jacket. He was neat and well-dressed, nothing to be ashamed of, but Billy's tie probably cost more than Steve's entire ensemble, and then some.

He was sitting quietly, clearly overwhelmed, taking in everything around him with wide eyes.

It was all Billy could do not to grin. He thought the evening was going great. He'd nearly thrown the poor guy into a nervous breakdown driving his Camaro at speed to the club, chattering snappishly about nothing and giving Steve no room to talk about himself (lest he get the impression that Billy was somehow interested in Steve as a person), and from the moment they'd entered The Hurricane they'd been swept up in a whirlwind of activity.

This was Billy's place – all the staff wanted to serve him, all the girls wanted to ride him, all the punters wanted to shake his hand.

Steve followed a few steps behind, unwilling to intrude as person after person tried to get Billy's attention, and equally reluctant to get swallowed up by the raucous crowd. When they finally reached the VIP lounge Steve attached himself to the nearest couch like a drowning man clutching at a raft and stayed there while Billy

continued to schmooze.

It was all perfect.

Steve, poor small-town Steve, clueless Steve who no doubt thought he was going to be wined and dined and coddled tonight would be so overwhelmed by the harsh glamour of this other reality, would be suffocated by Billy's influence and power. Billy would dangle this other dream-world in front of him, a world full of sensual delights that Steve couldn't even imagine, and make him feel small and shy and ignorant. Then he could have him on his own terms, eager and willing for anything Billy wanted to bestow.

The brat prince chooses you... be grateful. Do what he wants and say thank you.

He could have Steve in his bed, spread out and needing all that Billy, and only Billy, could give him. He could shape the pliant teacher to come when Billy called and leave when Billy bid, and not expect anything like that stupid white bread dating nonsense he was hoping for.

Billy feels a pang in his chest.

Even now, even with all this glitter and gold blinding Billy, the pale little teacher with the long brown hair and wide brown eyes looks more beautiful than anything and anyone in the joint. More real. Like a bit of moonlight had just up and walked in, outshining everything without even trying, with a light true and pure.

Enough of that.

"Cherry, Sherry!" Billy called, flicking his fingers. Two girls well known to Billy strut over – their names are a bit of a joke as they always seem to come as a pair. Billy smirks and motions for the blonde – either Cherry or Sherry, he can never remember which is which – to go over to give Steve a dance while he takes the brunette.

"This is the life, huh, Steve?" he yells as the girl straddles him.

Steve's eyes widen with something like horror as Cherry or Sherry leans over him and starts wiggling her breasts in his face.

Billy howls with laughter at the confused, almost wounded look he gets from the teacher, and he slaps his own dancer's ass (she has brown hair like Steve's, but there is where the similarities end – she's a dim shade compared to him, a lesser light. Billy thinks this but will never, ever admit it) as if to prove some larger existential point.

Steve grits his teeth and tries to find some point over the girl's shoulder to focus on, hopefully one that isn't made up of some combination of sequins and nipples. He wonders how he'll ever be able to look Maxine Hargrove in the face after this. Hell, anyone at school. What was he thinking?

"What's wrong, baby?" Cherry or Sherry slows her gyrations as it becomes more and more apparent that Steve is embarrassed and uninterested.

"I..." oh hell, he is so far out of his depth.

"What's the matter with him," the Cherry or Sherry on Billy's lap asks. "He gay or something?"

Billy barks out a rough laugh and Steve decides that he has had quite enough.

He very firmly puts both of his hands on Cherry or Sherry's hips and moves her off of his lap in one fluid motion, standing as he does so. He murmurs something to her that Billy can't hear, hands her a bit of paper he has clutched in his fist, and then ducks out of the VIP room. Billy shifts Cherry or Sherry to the side and she tilts his head up at the other girl.

"Where's he going?" he asks.

"Don't know, baby. He said sorry and that I was very lovely, but he had to go. He gave me this..." She unfurls what Steve had handed to her – a crumpled, worn-looking five-dollar bill.

You couldn't even get a soda in this place for five dollars, but it was all Steve had in his pockets. A sweet, pathetic gesture, the white flag waved by a middle-class farm boy who knows he's lost. The sight of the fiver makes Billy suddenly feel ill.

It takes Billy a moment to process the full implications of Steve's actions, but when he does he all but throws the dancer off his lap and bolts out of the club.

For a moment he thinks he's lost his date, but then he sees him... that hair, those shoulders slumped in that familiar jacket, headed down the street. Billy takes off after him, calling his name.

"Steve! Steve! Where you goin' man?"

Steve doesn't stop... he slows down slightly but he doesn't stop. He's walking towards the bus stop.

"I'm going home," he says. He wears an air of finality like armor.

"What the fuck? Why?"

"I... this was stupid."

"Look, we can go to another club if you want," Billy offers magnanimously. "If that's not your scene... that's cool. The night's still young, we can go somewhere else."

My bedroom, Billy is about to say, but he's cut short when he nearly runs into Steve, who has abruptly halted. Steve turns and looks at Billy finally, and suddenly Billy is pinned down, trapped – he can't escape the hurt in his eyes. No, not hurt... disappointment. So much worse.

"No," Steve says, his voice horribly neutral. "No, it's okay. I got it wrong. You're an asshole, or you're not out, or you're not... whatever, it's cool. I thought this was a date and it's not and that's my bad, so... I'm just gonna go home now."

He turns and starts walking again, ignoring Billy's echoed repetition of "home".

"Yes, home."

"Hey! Wait, Steve, c'mon!"

"No."

“Don’t you walk away from me!” Billy grabs Steve’s arm and pulls him close, jerking his body more roughly than he means to.

“Jesus,” Steve spins and tries to knock Billy’s hand away, but his grip is too strong. “What’s your fucking problem?”

“My problem? *My* problem?! Do you have any fucking idea who you’re talking to?”

“I think we’ve established that I don’t have any idea about anything, least of all,” Steve makes a waving hand gesture at the small, impossible space between the two of them, “this!”

Something about the way Steve says that, so emphatically, with all that righteous indignation boiling up in him and none of the usual fear that people always seem to have when talking to Billy Hargrove, draws Billy up short.

It occurs to him for the first time that evening that there might be a wholly unexpected consequence to his actions – that Steve might, in fact, just walk away from him.

“Jesus Christ,” Steve rolls his eyes and jerks his arm out of Billy’s grip when Billy doesn’t immediately answer. “Okay... I’m gay. You know that. We had sex in a janitor’s closet for God’s sake. Yes? I’m gay?”

Billy is still very unsettled by something he can’t quite put his finger on, but he nods in agreement. Yes, he knows that, he’s gotten that.

“Great. Okay. Now... you, Billy Hargrove, are you gay? Or bisexual, or whatever?”

Billy opens his mouth, then shuts it again. He looks behind him at the club, then back at Steve, who is standing with his hands on his hips looking every bit like the school teacher he is. He holds his gaze for a long moment and then drops his eyes to the ground.

He feels a wave of anger directed at both himself and Steve. Why does Steve need him to say it? And why the fuck can’t Billy say it? There’s no one else out here, no one to judge. Steve won’t have something over on Billy, won’t have proven anything if Billy says it out loud. Why?

Why couldn't they have just left it at hushed fumblings in the supply closet, at vague innuendos, at unspoken truths. Why?

When he looks back up, Steve is nodding sadly to himself.

"Then I guess I know who I'm talking to, now," Steve says with an air of dreadful finality. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got it wrong."

He walks away.

Most of the parents have already picked up their kids. There's Maxine left, and El Hopper, Principal Hopper's adopted kid, and Will Byers, who is waiting for his brother to pick him up, and a few others. Steve is letting them goof off on stage, watchful but staying a comfortable distance away so he doesn't interrupt their conversations.

It's important to give kids privacy, he thinks.

Because of this he's close to the auditorium doors when Billy Hargrove walks in. He's cleaning up his papers, so he has a bit of an excuse to be nonchalant... or at least to pretend to be so, when he sees that unmistakable form, as ever impeccably clad in a bespoke suit and expensive shoes.

He gets now that the Hargroves have money. He doesn't know that much about suits and cars but looking back now he realizes how fancy Hargrove's Camaro is and that he's never seen him pick up Max in sweatpants. Sure, Hawkins Prep is a nice school, but it's hardly Harvard and most of the parents don't show up in outfits that cost more than their child's tuition.

So yeah, he gets that Billy Hargrove has money. He guesses that that's what the display at that club was about. A club Billy apparently owns. He gets it now.

Hargrove is a big fish. Steve is a worm. Message received.

Steve's mentally putting the finishing touches on a snarky verbal dig

that will make it clear that he hates Hargrove and never wants to talk to him again when he finally turns around to face him. It's the first time he's seen him since that night, and he's ready to give it to him right between the eyes. Steve may be a loser, but he deserves better than what happened. However, his death blow is erased from his mind the moment he sees Billy's face.

"Jesus, what happened?!"

There's a big mark there on his face like he's been hit (*he's so beautiful*, Steve thinks dumbly, *nobody should ever hit him. Even though I kind of want to...*), and without thinking Steve puts down his papers and reaches out to Billy.

He stops himself before he actually touches his cheek, but it's a near miss and of course Billy notices it all, his eyes like lasers seeking out any weakness.

"That looks bad," he says, unable to keep the genuine concern from his voice. "You need ice? What happened?"

Billy doesn't answer, just looks at Steve, and Steve is reminded sharply of what Billy did and of his decision to never see him again. His hand drops, and he blushes.

"Max," he turns and yells, suddenly feeling exposed and desperate to cover his embarrassment. "Get your stuff, please!"

Max gives Steve one of her patented eye-rolls and starts collecting her books. Billy doesn't look away from Steve, just watches him as he shuffles and goes back to collecting his stuff.

"Steve," he says, his voice rough.

Steve doesn't answer, and he doesn't move. His eyes are fixed on a piece of trash that has managed to lodge itself under a seat a few rows up. He feels like a spooked deer, like prey.

"Steve," Billy repeats, and Steve lets out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in.

"Yes?" he murmurs.

“Would you like to go out with me?”

Steve's gaze shoot ups and locks on to Billy's eyes. Billy is watching him carefully. That cocksure expression is gone and if anything he looks a little sad, like he expects to be turned down. Like Steve doesn't understand something important. And yet, as he scans his face for clues, Steve can see nothing in Billy's look that isn't genuine.

"I'm ready," Max is at his elbow, pushing past him and towards her brother, already half-way out the door. Billy seems to take his silence as an answer and makes to leave.

Don't you dare! Steve screams to himself. *Don't even think about it!*

"Tonight?" The word is out before he can stop himself.

Billy nearly jumps in surprise, but he turns around quickly and answers.

"I can't tonight. I'm sorry. Can you do tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Steve echoes. "Yeah. Friday. Even better."

Billy's smile is bright and, Steve thinks, true.

You're an idiot, Steve Harrington, the voice in his head murmurs in resignation.

2. The wolf is hungry, he runs the show

Summary for the Chapter:

First date

“Please don’t do this!”

Billy shakes a cigarette out of a half-empty pack and lights it up. His fingertips leave a little smudge of red on the packaging and he makes a mental note to get rid of it before he leaves. That’s just the kind of stupid thing that gets you caught. Evidence.

He lights the cigarette because he wants the hit of nicotine, but also to prove a point.

The point is this...

Billy Hargrove does this every day, man, every fucking day. He’s seen it all and done it all, done dark deeds unimaginable in every way conceivable. Billy just wants the man lying bloodied and broken on the cold concrete floor to know that, to know that nothing he says or does can shock Billy, that nothing on earth can scare him or even really touch him, not deep down where it matters because he’s been there before.

He’s standing in this anonymous place, a dying man at his feet, and he is surrounded by everything he needs to make hell on earth, starting with the kneecaps and ending with the skull. He can use pliers on toenails, or experiment in amateur dentistry, or the stick the contents of a hardware store into an eyeball, or even just fall back on his ever-reliable crowbar. He can make hamburger meat out of a human body. And of course, to finish it all off, there’s a gun.

The man’s pain and death may elicit a raised eyebrow, a flutter of the hand, a crushing twinge of cynicism in Billy’s black, black heart, but the fact of the matter is that Billy is no stranger to any of this. When the screams start the animal takes over, and the part of him that might perhaps be sympathetic to the problems of his fellow man checks out, hits the road, moves to some distant place where none of

this shit exists.

The red mist descends and the wolf comes out.

The man on the ground should know that everything that happens now is just a shadow in the back of Billy's mind.

This asshole is just some deadbeat whose time is up.

"Please... you don't have to do this."

Begging. So pointless.

There is no money today, so Billy is taking a pound of flesh. This guy is part of a troublesome new gang, some nasty little upstarts causing trouble, torching a Hargrove Family establishment in an attempt to add a bit of shine to their reputation. Can't have that, no sir. So Billy comes in. One or two questions - speak up, sonny, for the people in the back! - and then we can all be on our merry way.

Billy's friend Tommy (kind of a friend... he's really just a semi-stranger who often joins him on these kinds of jobs) is on the phone with Neil, waiting for final instructions.

Billy made Tommy call. He's got blood on his hands and he doesn't want to get any on his phone. Besides, he doesn't really want to talk to Neil right now.

Instead he waits and smokes and and stares at the scene in front of him and wonders if cigarettes could be applied in a "Twinkie defense" type thing. A landmark case, that's what that would be.

Pictures of the past blown up, all so the jury can see better.

"As you see here, ladies and germs, Exhibit A..." and then the beauty of Billy's work, his ART in full color... and then horror and revulsion on the faces of the jury, those fearful, fascinated, fucking apple-pie people.

And then Exhibit B, the real culprit... a pack of rather chewy Marlboros that had fallen under the front seat of Billy's Camaro and had stayed there until they got stale and Billy got desperate enough

to fish them out again for this oh-so-unremarkable occasion (unremarkable for Billy, that is... the man on the floor is going to die, so it may perhaps be more remarkable for him).

Yep. The nicotine is what screwed his brain up, folks! Made him homicidal as hell!

Nicotine and low blood-sugar and a bruised cheek and a serious case of blue-balls.

A landmark case, indeed.

God, he wants to be on his date with Steve right now.

Tomorrow. He'll get to see him tomorrow.

It'll be a bit of a novelty... a real date. A real date with a real *person*. Not a shadow, not a flash of neon light reflected in the bottom of an empty glass. A *person*. He hadn't realized how much he'd wanted to see Steve and be around Steve and talk to Steve until the moment Steve had walked away from him outside of the club that night.

Like he was the king, and Billy was the supplicant.

Funny, that. Wouldn't have thought the teacher would have had that much steel in his spine... but Billy likes it. Most people would have crumbled under Billy's weight, and most of the men Billy had screwed around with in the past would have been taken in, would have played along gamely, would have smothered their fire because it was easier and safer that way. Because they were seduced by Billy and his flash-in-a-pan promises.

Not Steve, though. Oh, he'd been blinded for a little while, but not by the money and the glitter... he'd been drawn in by Billy's body, by his hunger, by his passion.

And then he'd taken what Billy had offered him and pushed it away. Steve had just looked at him, taken it all in, seen it for what it was - a transient, cheap glamour...a lie - and walked.

Billy's never seen that before. He likes all the contradictions that Steve throws his way. It's edging into something more than lust, now,

even more than simple intrigue and excitement. The more he's around Steve, the more he likes him.

He thinks of Steve, sweet, beautiful Steve, and then pushes him out of his head. Steve doesn't belong here, in this room, with these monsters.

Tommy nods to Billy and Billy goes back to work. The screams of the man on the floor end quickly.

"Please don't do this."

Billy pulls himself away from memories of anonymous rooms painted red and looks over at Max, surprised. She never usually talks to him when he is driving her around, and she definitely never talks to him in the mornings. Billy would like to think that maybe that's because neither of them morning people. The unfortunate reality, however, is that they just have even less to say to each other than usual in the hours before Max goes to school.

"Don't do what, Maxine?" he asks, his voice dripping with a patently insincere tone of syrupy indulgence.

"Please don't mess this up for me."

Billy doesn't follow, and he throws her a loaded look.

"I really like my classes... Mr. Harrington is really nice and he's helping me with my math stuff. Please, I'm making friends, I'm finally understanding fractions, please don't ruin it."

Silence falls in the car as Billy tries to sort out feelings of anger and frustration and fear. When he doesn't answer her immediately, Max plows on.

"I heard you ask him out. You're going out tonight, right? Please, just..."

"You haven't said anything to anyone about it?" Billy asks in a tone that implies that she really shouldn't have if she knows what's good for her. If Neil finds out there will be trouble.

No end of trouble.

"No, I..."

"Good," Billy cuts her off. "Keep it that way."

"What are you going to do?" Max asks fearfully.

Jesus Christ, you'd think he was going to string Steve up by his ankles and slit his throat over a dinner and drinks.

It worries Billy that Max thinks of him this way. He's the one who takes care of her, after all, while Neil is busy running his empire and Susan is off in Bali or Belize or Berlin or wherever the fuck she is.

Max had been a ball-ache for him from the moment Neil had married her trashy tramp of a mother, a whimpering bitch whose gentle sweetness had quickly been corrupted by the tawdriness of Neil's world. Billy had liked Max when he'd first met her, had liked her gritty stubbornness, but that recalcitrance had quickly turned into outright rebellion and the siblings' relationship had steadily deteriorated.

Still, he's the one who makes sure she's fed and dressed and at school on time, and they are united in some ways against a common enemy - their parents. A slip-up for one of them would negatively effect both of them, so the threat of mutually assured destruction means that personal secrets are kept... well, more or less secret. And while he hasn't made any huge effort, as far as Max was concerned, to hide where the Hargrove power and prestige comes from, Billy had thought she would have given him a little bit more credit.

He lets out a put-upon sigh.

"Well, first off, I'm thrilled that after two schools we finally found one that suits you, Maxine." That's a bit of a low blow. After all, the reason Maxine had been forced to leave her last school was technically because of Billy and his temper. Still, Billy had paid for

that indiscretion, both with Neil and with the sheer amount of time and paperwork spent moving Max to a new school and covering his own ass sufficiently.

Nevertheless...

"I'm not going to do anything. I'm going to take your teacher out for coffee. Got that? Coffee. Just for a chat. And if he's the awesome guy you seem to think he is, then nothing I do will make that much difference, will it?"

"It *will*, though..." Max mutters under her breath. Billy hears it all the same.

Billy lets his anger travel down his spine and through his legs like an electric current, all the way down until it starts to push his foot down on the gas pedal. He guns the car's engine in the way Maxine hates.

"You think I'm some kind of monster, Maxine?"

"No," she croaks, fear floating to the surface as the car goes faster and faster, weaving in and out of traffic at a breakneck speed.

"I didn't catch that..." Billy says, his voice dangerously low, his own adrenaline rush spiking.

"No," Max repeats in a louder voice, quaking with anxiety as they narrowly avoid knocking the side mirror off another car.

"Good," after one last breakneck turn, Billy decided to have mercy on her, lets the car slow. They're almost there anyway. They ride the rest of the way in silence, more or less following the traffic code, and when Billy pulls up to Hawkins Prep Max bounds from the car like it's on fire.

Harrington is standing at the entrance of the school when Billy pulls up, overseeing the morning drop-off. A smile spreads wide across his face and he waves at Billy.

No... if Steve Harrington is such a kind, understanding person, then Max has nothing to worry about. Billy has nothing to worry about. Steve has already proven that he can forgive Billy when Billy fucks

up. He's a nice guy.

And Billy can be nice, too, can't he? Sure. Billy can be kind.

Maxine runs up the front steps without a backwards glance. Billy gives Steve a little wave back and drives away with a gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach, feeling like an asshole and a fraud.

“You need to do something about this.”

Steve's day is not going well. Some part of him, the irritating, ‘never say die’ part, thinks maybe that's a good thing – the dress rehearsal before a big performance is always a disaster, but when that happens the Unspoken Law of the Universe dictates that the performance itself will go off without a hitch.

Maybe a bad day at work means a good date with Billy tonight.

Or maybe not.

Mr. Brenner is tall and lean and has an impressive head of white hair and an icy stare. When he talks he gives the distinct impression that he is toying with you, beating you at a game of three-dimension chess on a board that you can't even see. He reminds Steve of his father. He is scary as hell.

He is also in Steve's classroom, looming like the angel of death. His son, Jamie, is standing next to him, bright blood flowing from his nose.

Unfortunately, Steve has got his hands full, and he has the sneaking suspicion that he is not giving the impression of calm authority that he usually tries to project in front of parents.

His sweater is covered in specks of some unfortunate gluey substance from an earlier science project gone awry, his glasses are askew, and he is half-kneeling, half-standing, pressing a cloth bandage to a cut on Will Byers' forehead. His desk is a mess of half-graded papers and

his classroom smells of chemicals from science class, and at least five sets of children's voices are talking loudly, each trying to tell him what had happened.

It's three in the afternoon. School ends at three. They're supposed to leave him alone at three.

"Max *punched*..."

"Jamie started it! He called her mom a...!"

"And then Will...!"

"Will got knocked over!"

"I'm okay, Mr. Harrington, really..."

"I can't believe she *punched*...!"

"So cool..."

"Sorry..."

"And then Jamie said her brother was a...!"

"Alright, enough!" Steve barks, holding up his free hand in a motion that means 'silence'. The kids, fortunately, are well trained. The chatter stops almost immediately, and the young faces turn to focus on him.

Mike Wheeler, El Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, Will Byers. Why is it always those five? Steve groans inwardly and readjusts his glasses.

"I've got the picture, guys," he says, for the moment choosing to ignore Brenner and his glowering. "Mike, I need you to take Will to the Nurse's Office. The rest of you, if you're not in After School Care, you need to be in front of school with Mr. Clarke so that your parents can pick you up. Mr. Brenner," he says, finally looking up at him. "Would you like to accompany your son to the Nurse's Office or would you like one of the other students to..."

"There's no need," Brenner's lip curls up slightly as Jamie presses a tissue against his bloody nose. "We'll get this issue sorted out and then I will be taking Jamie home for treatment."

"Alright," Steve says. He doesn't appreciate the suggestion that the school would somehow give Jamie substandard care, but it's Brenner's choice. "Get moving," he tells the remaining kids in a tone that leaves no room for argument. Mike helps Will keep the bandage pressed against his forehead and ushers him out, the rest of the gang in tow.

"You need to do something about this," Brenner repeats, in a tone that makes Steve want to curl up and whimper.

Maxine, who has said nothing at all since she walked back into Steve's classroom, stands at the far edge of Steve's desk, with Steve between her and the Brenners. Her hands are clenched in fists and her eyes are on the ground. Not good, Steve thinks. He returns to his first-aid kit and unpacks another cloth bandage. He gives it to Jamie Brenner, who snatches it away without saying 'thank you' and applies it to his nose.

"Now it's my understanding," Steve says, in a tone of forced calm that he doesn't feel, "that Jamie and Maxine got into a fight in the hall..."

"That girl," Brenner interrupts, spitting the word 'girl' out as though he really means to say, 'that animal', "attacked my son. It was fortunate that I was already on my way inside the school to pick him up, or else who knows what might have happened."

"So, insults were exchanged and then Max..." Steve continues as if he hadn't heard Brenner. When she hears her name, Max looks up and fixes Steve with an undeniably guilty expression. "Max, you hit Jamie?"

"He called my mother a..."

"This is nonsense," Brenner spits, interrupting. "I would like to take this to the principal, if you'd be so kind. This is clearly part of a pattern of violent behavior and ought to result in expulsion."

Jesus, Steve thinks, watching Maxine go pale.

"I'm not sure," he says, trying to keep his voice level, "what you mean by a 'pattern' of behavior. Maxine has never..."

"Oh, please, Mr. Harrington. What else would you expect from a Hargrove?"

Max makes a small noise, but Steve doesn't look at her. Instead, his eyes narrow and he fixes Mr. Brenner with a cool gaze.

"I beg your pardon?"

Brenner smiles. It's not a nice smile. "Surely you know about the Hargrove Family, Mr. Harrington? They're quite well-known around here as thugs and criminals. To be honest, I'm shocked that they allowed a member of that family in to this school. You can be sure that I'll be voicing my complaints to the school board. I do, after all, play golf with the Superintendent."

Steve takes a deep breath. In and out, like he's trained himself to do. When he has centered himself, he plasters his 'teacher face' on.

"Well, you can certainly do that if you want to," Steve says agreeably. "However, I am an on-duty school administrator and I am authorized to deal with this sort of thing. And, Mr. Brenner, I'm sure you are aware, since you play golf with the Superintendent, that this school has a very strict no-tolerance policy on bullying.

"Now, I will be sorting out Maxine's punishment, and that punishment will include a written apology and a week of detention. However, I'm concerned that several witnesses have now claimed that Jamie initiated the exchange and used language which is unacceptable at Hawkins Prep. While he will not be receiving detention, I would also appreciate a written letter of apology from *him* so that we do not have any more verbal bullying."

"He will do no such thing," Brenner insists. "He..."

"I would also like to remind you," Steve continues doggedly, "that the no-bullying policy extends to all students, faculty, staff, and *parents* in the school, and that Principal Hopper is quite well-

known for enforcing this policy very... democratically. Therefore, if you would mind keeping your opinions of other families and students to yourself while in my classroom, I would really appreciate it.”

Silence falls, and Steve holds his breath. He is trying very hard not to show how nervous he is right now. He hates confrontation and conflict as a rule, and as a teacher there is no more terrifying unknown than a parent... they always have the capacity to make your life hell.

For god's sake, they're supposed to all *go home* at three!

Finally, after a long moment, Jamie Brenner breaks the silence by shuffling miserably. Brenner really should have let Steve send him to the Nurse, but the upshot is that the tension breaks somewhat.

Brenner finally nods and gives Steve a very insincere smile. Steve wonders vaguely if he's going to be fired because of this. At the moment he'd accept that outcome if it meant that this interaction would end. For now, fortunately, all Brenner gives him is a terse “very well” before tugging his son out of the classroom.

Steve sighs and slouches. He feels exhausted, but he's not done yet.

“Okay, Max,” he says, wearily. He can see Max gearing up for another fight and the thought of it makes him cringe.

“It'll be detention and a written apology. If we can keep Principal Hopper out of it that might be for the best. If it goes to him then I don't know... it may be more serious.”

“But he deserved it!”

Steve can't find it in himself to disagree. He doesn't like the Brenner family at all, not the son or the father. But that's not the point.

“Listen to me, kiddo,” Steve sits on his desk so he's a bit more on Max's level. “Lots of people deserve to get smacked in the face sometimes. But we can't just get physical with others whenever we feel like it.”

“But...”

"We don't react in anger," Steve says, firmly. "When we lash out in anger, we aren't in control of ourselves. Sure, maybe someone deserves it... maybe they say or do horrible things. But we can't control others. We can only control ourselves and how we react. When you're angry, when you react violently, you can't always control who else gets hurt. You managed to pop Jamie in the nose... okay. But where are we? Will Byers got hurt in that scuffle, too. It's you and not Jamie Brenner in here right now getting detention. Nothing was solved, and people who you didn't mean to hurt got in the way."

Max's eyes are fixed on her shoes and Steve can see that she is struggling not to cry. God, he hates this.

"Hey," Steve reaches out and tries to get her to look up at him. "Sweetie, I know you didn't mean it."

"I did though," she snuffles, eyes still focused on the ground. "He said awful things about Billy. And my mom."

"He's an asshole, Max," Steve says, then chuckles when the swear word elicits a surprised, gleeful reaction from the girl. "Yes. He's an asshole. An asshole with a bloody nose. I wish there was something I could do, but sometimes people get away with saying horrible things that aren't true. Sometimes you just have to keep your chin up and push past the words."

"I'm sorry," Max sighs miserably. "I need to say sorry to Will."

"Hey, it's okay, Max. It's okay. Look... I have to give you a week's detention, but you can have it with me instead of Hopper, okay? You can write out your apology letters, and then we can work on your math homework."

"You're not mad?" Max looks up again.

Steve gets suddenly what Max is worried about.

"No, Max, I'm not mad," he assures her. "I wish you hadn't done that... and you understand why you can't do anything like that again, yeah?" Max nods. "I think you're a cool kid, Max, and this doesn't

make me think any less of you as a student or as a person. It was the wrong thing to do, hitting Jamie, but I trust that won't happen again."

Max chews her lower lip.

"You'll need to tell your brother and your parents, though," Steve sits down at his desk and pulls out a sheet of paper. "I'll write you a note to give to them."

"Yeah," Max says distantly. "I'll give it to them."

Steve has been a teacher long enough to know when one of his students is lying.

"We need to talk about Max," Steve says, walking down the steps of Hawkins Prep towards Billy's haphazard parallel parking job at the school's entrance. It's five in the evening and he is finally done for the day, though apparently there are still some issues that need to be taken care of before he can enjoy his date.

Billy is leaning against the door of his Camaro, waiting, and as he greets the teacher he has to admit to himself that he's had better opening lines thrown at him.

"Why?" he asks, feeling a ping of irritation. He'd already picked Maxine up and dropped her off at home, and she'd had nothing to say to him, as usual.

Steve sighs as he approaches the car and hikes his carrier bag up his shoulder. He lifts both hands to his head and sweeps his fingers through his long, messy hair.

"Okay, well... full disclosure, I had to give her detention today."

"You gave Maxine detention?"

"She punched a boy in the nose! It was a great hit, apparently, but totally not okay! What's worse, the kid's parent saw it. The choices

were between detention and possible expulsion, but I managed to... let's say I strongly implied to the boy's father that his child would also get into trouble if he pursued it. He seemed to not like your family for some reason, which I think was part of the issue... though I don't know why."

"What's his name?"

"The kid's Jamie Brenner. You know, you really should talk to Max about this, I told her to tell you..."

"Brenner," Billy allows his lip to curl up in a nasty sneer, his fingers twitching. "Yeah, I know the Brenners. Martin Brenner works for the government. He's a scumbag... one step up from an arms dealer."

"Well," Steve sighs, shrugging, "for his part, he straight up said that the Hargroves have tendency towards violence..."

He eyes up the bruise on Billy's cheek, which has matured fully into a dark purple mark since their last conversation, but then almost immediately decides not to mention it.

"Fuck," Billy mutters. He can't help it... he pulls out a pack of smokes and lights up, irritation etched in every one of his movements.

"I'm missing something," Steve states, shoving his hands in his pockets, taking in Billy's annoyance. It's not a question.

Billy inhales deeply on his cigarette, allows the nicotine to calm him slightly, and shifts his weight against the car. He exhales slowly and studies Steve, drinking in the sight of him. He's wearing his glasses again, and carrying a bag loaded with work. The teacher looks tired, upset, worried. Pretty as always, but with a sharp edge of fragility today.

"You had a bad day," Billy says, unable to keep an edge of concern out of his voice.

"I've had a long day," Steve admits. He's picking at a spot on his sweater that looks suspiciously like dried glitter glue. "Teaching is one of those jobs where when things go wrong they tend to go wrong

all at once. Some days are harder than others.”

“Yeah,” Billy knows what's that like.

“What about you,” Steve asks. “Did you do whatever you had to do last night?”

Billy flinches slightly at the memory (it doesn't bother him, no sir, he's seen it all and done - *please don't do this you don't have to do this oh god blood mommy please blood please don't do this please god no* - it all) and nods. “Yeah.”

“Listen, about Max...”

“You’re her teacher,” Billy interrupts. “She likes you a lot.”

Steve tilts his head and, when Billy doesn't continue, accepts what he is reading between the lines. School is Steve's domain, and Billy won't (for now) intrude on his relationship with Max.

Billy wonders if Steve understands just what that means, how rare it is for Billy to trust someone like that... to trust that he is a good person and would never be cruel to Max. Any other teacher might have needed a stern talking to on what was and wasn't allowed in terms of school discipline, and Billy has been known to get... testy.

PTA moms can be fierce, but they don't usually carry around loaded .45's as a rule.

Steve probably doesn't understand. Better if he doesn't.

Steve smiles, finally, and something in Billy relaxes at the sight. Billy flicks his cigarette away and then stands up and opens the passenger's door of the Camaro with a theatrical flourish, ready to put this conversation behind them.

"I believe I owe you a date," he says.

“There’s a diner down the street from my apartment,” Steve grins. “Buy me a burger?”

The diner is not his usual kind of haunt, but it's also not as terrible as

Billy fears. It's clean and warm, and they have a fancy kind of milkshake that looks promising. He feels strangely... comfortable. Maybe a little out of place in his designer threads, but nobody looks at him twice as they're seated in a cozy booth in a quiet corner. The staff recognize Steve – seems he's been in there a few times before – and one waitress waggles her eyebrows at him as if to say – *Look at you! You're on a DATE!*

Otherwise, it is the opposite of their first not-date. All the sequins have been stripped away, and what's left is just Billy and Steve, sprawled casually in their seats, content to peruse their menus and listen to Supertramp playing on the restaurant's radio.

They order their food and start talking.

Billy asks what Steve needs his glasses for.

(Answer: "To see, dumbass." "I *know* that, I meant..." "Yeah, yeah, I know... they're for reading, mostly...")

Steve asks about Billy's Camaro.

("First car I ever bought, actually... got it for a couple hundred bucks from a junkyard and restored it myself... I'm an okay mechanic...")

They go back and forth. They've been fucking off and on for months now and have christened almost every closet and desktop in Hawkins Prep, but now they go slowly, tentatively, pushing quietly into the undiscovered territory of each other, plucking at unfamiliar strings and listening to the notes that come out.

"I'm from the Midwest. Yeah..." Steve says, agreeing with the look that crosses Billy's face. "Growing up there was just as great as you'd expect. Dad wanted me to work for him in a 9 to 5 office gig, and I wanted to study art."

"Art?" Billy asks. "You're an artist?"

Steve blushes and shakes his head. "Erm, no. Those who can't do, teach... you know the expression. I do, um... I do paint and draw. I'm trying to come up with a piece for the Loyola Art Contest next month. But it doesn't pay the bills. It's more of a hobby now."

Billy studies the man sitting across from him as Steve covers his embarrassment by taking a sip of soda.

After a moment he nods.

“My old man’s the same. Wants me to follow in his footsteps. He’s pretty insistent, actually.”

“You know, talking today with Brenner I just realized I don’t know what you do.” Steve shakes his head. “I’m sorry, it was rude of me not to ask. Do you work in a similar field?”

“We’re in waste management.”

Steve blinks at Billy. “Waste management. What, like, garbage men? You run a garbage company?”

“Executive level,” Billy clips out in a tone that kindly suggests that Steve drop this line of questioning immediately.

Steve opens his mouth, then shuts it again, looking a little put out. He may just be a teacher, but he does understand how business works. In theory, anyway. There’s no need to assume that Steve wouldn’t be interested or capable of understanding.

“We work with union contracts,” Billy hedges, trying to placate the teacher when he sees the irritated look on his face. “We... Brenner, today... Brenner was getting bitchy because the work we do is the kind of thing that always has a shady reputation. We need to collect and distribute money and, in the old days, that kind of business had a bad rap.”

“Like...” Steve’s eyebrows shoot up. He remembers what Brenner had said... *thugs and criminals*. “Wait, like the mafia or something?”

“Brenner’s a snob,” Billy shrugs, redirecting the conversation. His nonchalant tone soothes Steve’s momentary fears... *not criminals...that’s silly, Steve. Of course not. That stuff happens in movies, not real life.*

“He’s got a contract with the government to develop some high-tech weapon bullshit, and he’s got a state senator in his pocket, so any

other reasonably successful businessman in the city is just shit on his shoe. He thinks my dad is a gangster, and he thinks he's better than us because he doesn't get his hands dirty with the common folk."

"Plays golf with the school Superintendent, too," Steve says wryly, and when Billy throws him a questioning look he shakes his head. "You don't want to know. I've made his son write a letter of apology for today, so I might be getting fired at some point. No biggie."

"I'd like to see him try," Billy growls, startling the waitress next to him, who puts down their burgers and scuttles away in a hurry.

Steve smiles.

"Did you always want to work for your dad?"

"Always," Billy says. There's something definitive in his voice that makes Steve a bit sad.

"You never wanted to be an astronaut or anything?"

Steve is teasing, but Billy takes him seriously.

"I guess..." Billy trails off thoughtfully. "I kind of wanted to be a basketball player. For a little while."

"You'd be good at that," Steve says. "You're ripped."

"You noticed," Billy says, his grin turning feral. "I'm touched."

"Shut up. Did you play in school?"

"Yeah."

"I did too, for a while. I was okay. Do you still play?"

"Not so much, now," Billy admits. "I keep fit in other ways."

"Oh yeah?"

Shit, Billy doesn't want to go down this route either. Something tells him that professional torture, body disposal, and bare-knuckle boxing in illegal matches wouldn't necessarily impress Steve as the best ways

to work on one's physique. He pivots.

"Can I see some of your paintings?"

Steve's train of thought hits a bump, then screeches to a halt and crashes. After a beat, he smirks.

"Is that your super-subtle way of asking to come back to mine?"

It hadn't been, actually, but Billy would never admit to being anything other than a smooth-talking devil. He lets his smirk match Steve's and tilts his head in invitation.

"You're not gonna run out on me again?" he asks, playful.

"Depends. Are you hiding a stripper in your pocket and planning to pull some bullshit macho sexual-repression thing?"

Billy feels his face go unexpectedly hot and he drops his gaze to the table. For once the nasty, unforgivable retort on the tip of his tongue stays there, unspoken. Thank Christ for one rare moment of restraint. He lets his fingers tap-dance their way over to the check and finds himself suddenly fascinated with how much a burger costs.

"Is it...?" Steve starts, then stops again. "Are you not out? Because it's okay if you're not out."

Billy's eyes flick up. This guy is something else, man. He never stops poking a thing, even when common sense tells him he should. Still...

"Really," Steve insists when Billy gives him an incredulous look. "Like I said... small-town Midwesterner here. I get it if you're not out, if you can't be or whatever."

"I'm..." Billy is at a loss. Genuinely, no one has ever asked him. He's had both men and women. He's tried everything. Neil has made insinuations about his hair and his clothes, used slurs when Billy or someone else displeased him in some way. The other guys at 'work' (if we're calling it work) echo Neil... nights out with the boys are always full of exactly the same misogynistic - what had Steve called it? - "macho bullshit" that stops Billy from openly discussing his attraction to men. In that crowd it would be seen as a weakness.

Of course, there was also the... well, Neil calls it the *incident*... but he can't revisit that now.

And, really, even the men Billy had bedded before... for the most part they had all been pliable lovers, casual flings, willing to shut up and get lost the moment Billy was done with them.

Uncomplicated.

"I'm not trying to get you to march in Pride," Steve assures him, his lips quirking up in mild amusement, seemingly oblivious to Billy's thoughts... and Billy is thinking, he's thinking very hard... he's thinking that the man in front of him is maybe much more dangerous than he appears. "Although I usually go anyway, so just FYI. But if you don't want to label it, it's fine, Billy. Just as long as you don't deliberately put me in a situation where I'm uncomfortable. Not like last time. That wasn't cool."

"No," Billy admits, distracted, chewing on his lip. "No, that wasn't cool."

If Steve wasn't Steve Billy would have walked away weeks ago. He'd have laughed as Steve flounced his way out of The Hurricane and never given it a second thought. But there's something about this man and it scares the shit out of Billy. Billy Hargrove doesn't do fear well, and never has, but even he can admit that trying to seduce and bully the teacher into compliance didn't work out for either of them.

"I'm not going to be someone's dirty secret," Steve says very seriously. "But I can be discrete."

Steve is working his way into Billy's blood.

It's dangerous for both of them.

Maybe, Billy thinks... maybe that's not the worst thing ever.

"We gonna do this?"

They've made it back to Steve place. It's a shitty apartment above a laundromat, but the minute Billy crosses the threshold it feels like pure Steve and all the rest of the grime seems to melt away. It's warm and messy and homey. Steve's got stacks of papers to be graded piled up on his coffee table and a collection of student art projects on his shelves.

He has a dinky little TV that Billy decides he'll soon replace with a bigger one, and a lumpy sofa that will probably also have to go. Something classy yet comfy, fabric rather than leather. Something cozy would probably suit Steve more - he seems like the kind of person who likes to 'nest' - and Billy logs that idea with the rest of his schemes. The kitchen will have to be completely redone... he'll need to keep Steve out of the apartment for at least a whole day for that while he gets his guys in to work on it.

Photos line the walls, pictures of people Billy doesn't know and places he's never been. Some are quite professional looking - black and white pictures of cities, portraits of people - and others are blurred amateur snapshots taken at parties and among friends. There are a few class photos framed and mounted in a place of honor.

Mostly, though, the room is taken up by an artist's work space. Finished paintings on canvas boards are stacked neatly in one corner. The unfinished one on an easel is angled towards the window, and Billy can see that Steve's been working on capturing the view of the street below.

Billy blinks at Steve's question. "We gonna do this?" Steve is standing anxiously by the easel, arms wrapped around his middle, ready to show Billy his work. Billy is reluctantly charmed by how eager Steve is to share this with Billy, and by the almost curious expression on his face, like he genuinely wants to know what Billy thinks. Billy gamely steps forward to look at Steve's art.

It's a beautiful painting. Billy thinks so, anyway. He's rich but he doesn't really know anything about art. Either way, he likes it. It's colorful and vibrant, capturing the hustle and bustle of the street, the flashing, multi-colored lights illuminating the faces of people on the sidewalk.

"I like it," he says.

"Yeah?" Steve sounds weirdly hopeful. "I was thinking of submitting it for something. Or there's this one..." Steve holds out another, and Billy takes it. It's of the kids, Steve's students. "That one was rejected from the Ludwig Art Institute, actually. But I like it."

Billy smiles and listens as Steve talks him through his other paintings. He categorizes them mostly according to which fancy muckety-muck art place has rejected them, and as he goes on Billy finds himself growing more and more offended on Steve's behalf.

Billy thinks they're good paintings, and not just because the guy who painted them is desperately lovely.

How dare some art snob suggest Steve's stuff is anything less than good? How dare they reject something that belongs (tangentially) to Billy?

Steve himself seems to take it in stride, and glosses over past failures and criticism in order to talk about his different creative choices and techniques.

"Does it bother you?" Billy asks, finally, unable to contain himself.

Steve pauses mid-explanation, and Billy flinches when he considers how this might sound. He plows ahead anyway.

"Does it bother you that you keep getting rejections?"

Now he's put his foot in it... Steve immediately falls silent, lowering the canvas he was holding. Billy wants to erase his words, to tug up Steve's arm so he can look at the painting he's holding again. It's a lovely piece, something unusual, an experiment with an interesting shade of yellow and a broad brush stroke technique (see, he was paying attention), and Billy wants to see it.

He shouldn't have said anything...

"Yes," Steve says, after a long, pregnant moment.

He doesn't sound upset, miraculously.

"I hate getting rejections. Everyone hates it, but..." Steve bites his lower lip and tilts his head to meet Billy's gaze.

"This is a story you probably don't need to hear, but... oh well. You did ask." Steve shrugs and brings his free hand up to run it through his hair.

"So... my dad didn't want me to be an artist. I mean he *really* didn't want it. As I was moving out, walking out the door, the last thing he said to me was that no one in their right mind would ever want anything I made and that I was a fool to think they would."

Billy goes cold inside, represses the urge to growl.

"I told you, I think, that I just moved here a few months ago... well, I was in another city before that," Steve puts down the painting and goes to his kitchen. The apartment is so small that it's practically the same room. "I had a boyfriend there... Joey. Met him my third day in town. I was going to be this renowned artist, I was going to make it big, you know? And at first it was great. I spent more money than I had getting an apartment with Joey, and I started painting, started living this... I guess I thought it was a really bohemian lifestyle. It wasn't, of course... a little weed and cold Chinese take-out and a completely fucked-up sleep schedule does not an artist make. I think... I think it showed in my work, too. My stuff then was... it wasn't anything to be proud of. Pretending to be an artist isn't the same thing as making art. I liked the lifestyle, thought it was cool and romantic to be stoned and hungry and on top of Joey all the time, but then I forgot that I was supposed to be *creating* something while I was doing all this."

Steve fishes two beers out of the fridge and hands one to Billy, who barely notices it.

"It's not a very interesting story, now that I think about it," Steve admits. He looks at Billy.

"You're a big fish type of guy, right? You've been around? You've probably heard this one before, then. My dad's words... I laughed it off at the time, but that parting shot pretty much colored everything I did, and then everything else went downhill from there. Same old

story. Boyfriend starts out supportive... turns into a dick. Starving artist can't come up with an original idea. Starving artist starts actually starving. Starving artist can't cope. Starving artist has a breakdown and gives up on his work," Steve sighs, dropping onto his lumpy sofa. "Fucking cliché, really."

Billy remains standing, listening, holding his beer without drinking it.

"It might have ended really badly. Disastrously, even," Steve shakes his head in self-disgust.

"What happened?" Billy croaks, a feeling like fear bubbling in his chest.

"I..." Steve hesitates, then squares his shoulders and continues doggedly. "My dad was right. Nobody wanted anything I made, and nobody ever would. And Joey got... worse... and I started to think that nobody would ever want *me*. That I was useless, worthless, and that it would be better if I stopped... well, if I just stopped."

Silence fills the apartment.

"It was a funny thing, actually," Steve continues after a moment. "The guy who ended up helping me. I knew him from my hometown. Jonathan. He dated someone that I had dated... a girl... before I accepted that I was gay. Small-town life, you know, and I struggled to come out so I dated a few girls, and... anyway, Jonathan had come to the city too, like me, on a short-term art scholarship. He was going to become a photographer. But, unlike me, he was doing really well. He'd gotten this portfolio accepted at a major gallery and he, well... he'd kind of 'arrived' in his way. But Jonathan was always a bit of a weirdo. He didn't really like the talking and schmoozing side of things... going to gallery openings and promoting his work. He just wanted to take photos. I honestly don't think he cared if he got paid or not."

"So, what? He introduced you to art dealers and shit?"

"No, actually," Steve grins a little, but it comes off more as a grimace. "I'd fallen so deep in a hole that I'd stopped working completely. It was... I don't want to go into it, but it was bad."

“So, what did he do?”

“Well... first thing he did was get me out of that apartment and away from Joey. That probably solved half of my problems right there. Joey always seemed to be whispering in my ear, repeating the kind of stuff my father said. Jonathan took me back to his place and locked the door behind him and spent three weeks with me, just hanging out.”

Billy cocks his head. “Hanging out?”

“Yeah. Just talking to me. He started out talking about small stuff, gossip from home, and then about the projects he was working on, about things he’d seen around town. Then he started talking about his photos, and what they meant to him, and what art means to people in general. About life, I guess. Jonathan reads a lot of philosophy... all that heavy stuff I never did understand.

“I wasn’t up for much for a while...” Steve admits. “I think I barely spoke that first week. And sometimes we didn’t talk, sometimes we just sat and watched TV, or he would work, or whatever. I slept a lot. It was nice, you know? Just having someone be there, without any expectations or pressure. And then I started talking... talking about what was bothering me. Tried to put it in to words. And he started talking, too, about his dad. I thought mine was bad, but Jonathan’s dad was a real nightmare. I don’t think we left the apartment at all except for food and to walk around town once and a while.

“And then...” Steve sighs. “Three weeks? Two and a half? I think it was three weeks in... I agreed to go see a doctor.”

Steve falls silent, contemplating his beer bottle. Billy feels drawn to him, like a magnetic pull, and before he can think about it he’s on the couch next to him. He doesn’t reach out, even though he really wants to. Reaching out might break the spell, burst the bubble. He just lets their knees touch. He hopes it anchors Steve, helps him.

“I lost everything,” Steve continues. “When I did go back to my apartment I found out that Joey had taken all our stuff and split. I was working as a waiter but I lost my job when I had my breakdown. I slept on Jonathan’s couch while I pieced my life back together, one

day at a time. I started seeing a therapist and after two years I got my teaching certification.

"I... I'm on medication for anxiety," Steve's eyes dart away and his mouth twists down, like he's expecting something from Billy... an outburst or a rejection. "You should know that, if you want to keep...keep seeing me. I still get insomnia and panic attacks sometimes. I get fixated on the idea that I've let everyone down and it takes me a while to pull myself out of the hole again. I haven't dated... you're the first guy I've been with in a while. I was always too afraid I'd fuck it up to risk it. And even when I started getting help... I didn't start painting again right away. It hurt too much. It was like this wall in my head. For a long time, I thought that that part of me was destroyed... dead."

Billy doesn't move. He doesn't know what to say. He just watches Steve as Steve talks, processing his story, trying to imagine his sunny, sweet teacher struggling and in pain. It twists something inside of him to think about it.

"Jonathan lives here now, actually, downtown" Steve smiles fondly. "His family had moved here when we were in high school, and he moved back here when he finished his degree. His brother goes to Hawkins Prep and his mom has me over for dinner sometimes. He's the one who told me they were hiring new teachers, and he even went in and waited for me while I had my interview with Principal Hopper. Took me out for pizza after. It's so stupid..." he lets out a self-deprecating chuckle. "I barely knew the guy when we were at school together, always thought he was strange. And he saved my life."

Steve stands up suddenly, almost spills his beer. Billy is startled but immediately soothed by the smile on Steve's face.

"I hate getting rejections," Steve says, brightly. He picks up a painting leaning against the wall.

"Every time I get one I hear my father's voice in my head again. I was so afraid that I refused to even think about painting for almost a year. My dad... my dad basically won. For a year. And then one day, out of nowhere... I drew a picture of one of the waitresses at the diner

down the block. I drew it in ballpoint pen on the back of a napkin. I still have it, somewhere. I did it without thinking, and it felt so damn good. It was like a miracle.

"And, look..." he holds up his painting, the one of his students. "That's the kids. I spent a long time on it. It's good, isn't it? It's not just good... it's *real*. The Ludwig Center rejected this but, look..." he gestures with his beer bottle to one of the faces in the painting.

It's a hectic, colorful explosion emphasizing a bright smile and warm eyes, and something deep inside Billy that he had thought was long gone is touched... moved.

"That's Dustin. You don't know Dustin, but that's exactly what he's like. And that's Will, Jonathan's brother," Steve points to another face, this one a hundred layered shades of blue and purple.

"It's what I see. There's no bullshit in it. Not for me." Steve looks at the painting and then back up at Billy, his face an honest sunrise, an open window. Billy is nearly overcome with the desire to wrap him up and tuck him away and keep him forever.

"Every time a painting of mine gets rejected it hurts. But it's a hurt I understand, now. And every time after a rejection... every time I pick up a brush again, it's a victory. I started painting again for *me*," Steve says, as though that's the most remarkable thing in the world.

Billy and Steve look at each other for a long time before Billy asks if he can kiss him.

Steve looks at him for another long moment, and then nods.

Billy doesn't have time to get off the lumpy sofa and give Steve his kiss. Steve deposits his beer and is on him in a heartbeat, straddling him, his lips on Billy's, raw and demanding.

"Sorry about all the heavy shit," he murmurs against Billy's mouth.

"Don't be," Billy says, only breaking the kiss long enough to tug Steve's sweater off. "It's amazing... you're amazing. I'm so... I'm so proud of you. That's stupid, maybe, but I am proud, and... and happy. It's perfect."

Billy pushes up, his mouth demanding, his tongue lapping into Steve's mouth.

"Thank you for telling me," he gasps. He means it. He feels like he's been given a gift. Trust.

Steve shakes his head, focuses his attention on undoing Billy's shirt buttons.

"Thank you for listening to me. Guys before, they've been put off by all the... the baggage. I thought you should know. Just in case you didn't want..."

"Stop now," Billy growls, hand reaching up and gripping Steve's hair, a warning tug. "Stop before you say something stupid. I want. I want you. You've been through hell and I've been through hell, too, with my own shit... but we've found each other now. We found each other, and it's all good. Believe me, all that shit just makes you more... *more* for me."

Steve's hands stutter to a stop and he inhales shakily, unable to meet Billy's eyes. Billy thinks maybe he understands why... and it's okay. He gives the teacher a moment to pull himself together. Then he lets go of Steve's hair and tugs Steve's chin up so their eyes meet, his mouth quirking up in a lewd grin.

"You gonna ride me, pretty boy?"

Steve's eyes glaze over slightly and Billy takes that as a yes. He goes in for another kiss but Steve's hand on his mouth stops him.

"Shit..." Steve mutters, leaning away suddenly. "Wait, shit, hang on."

Steve lifts himself off Billy's lap and scurries into the bedroom, returning moments later still in his shirt but without his pants, holding a bottle of lube and a strip of condoms.

"Sorry," he says, throwing the goodies on the couch before climbing back on Billy's lap and wiggling a bit like a cat making itself comfortable on a pillow. "Okay, continue."

Billy lets out a barking laugh and grabs the bottle, starts preparing Steve to take him. He wonders, as he lubes up and starts fingering Steve open, when the last time a lover made him laugh was. He can't remember ever feeling like this with anyone else. He always feels a little bit like laughing with Steve... even when talking about sad things.

Because Steve is a survivor, Billy thinks. Steve is a good guy, a bit of moonlight and beauty in the world, and he's strong. All the sad things, all the bad shit, and Steve survives.

In Billy's world, a world of cynicism and brutality, a person like Steve is a miracle.

Steve's tight and Billy has to remember that they haven't had sex in a while, thanks in no small part to his own stupidity. He's gentle yet thorough, enjoying the grip of those hot inner walls on his fingers. Steve lets out a low moan that goes straight to Billy's cock. Steve can be so loud during sex... and this is the first time they haven't had to be quiet, when they haven't been hiding under a desk or in a closet, waiting for the school principal to find them.

Although...

"You got neighbors, Steve?" Billy asks with forced casualness when he's got three of his fingers deep inside Steve's ass.

"Wha...?" The look on Steve's face is priceless as he tries to muster an incredulous look in his current state. "You're asking now? Why?"

"Well," Billy smirks, "I think it's time you introduce me to them. Nice and loud." He twists his fingers against Steve's prostate to emphasize his point.

"Nugh... Billy..." Steve warns, face flushed, panting. Billy finds himself fascinated by the blush on his cheeks and the way it creeps down to his chest. He dips his head forward and presses his mouth to red skin,

reveling in Steve's struggle to keep it together.

"Nuh-uh, Steve," Billy's grin widens, his grip tightens. "Louder. So the whole street can hear..."

"Oh my God, you're an ass..." Steve's voice hitches. He is trying so hard to be disapproving. He can't stop the whine, however, when Billy finally removes his fingers and lifts Steve up, lining him up over his waiting cock.

"Hi everybody," Billy murmurs against Steve's skin as he gently guides him down. "This is Steve's new squeeze. His name is..."

Billy's leaking cock-head breaches Steve's hole.

"Billy!" Steve gasps, his hands scrambling over Billy's shoulders, seeking purchase.

"Louder, baby," Billy groans as he sheaths himself completely in Steve's ass and then makes a quick, jerking thrust upward with his hips.

"Billy," Steve cries, and he withdraws slightly and thrusts again. "Billy, Billy..."

Satisfied, Billy starts fucking Steve in earnest, hands on Steve's hips as Steve eagerly rides his cock. Steve is Billy's shy, sweet boy, but goddamn if he isn't also the most genuinely enthusiastic person Billy's ever had sex with. He moves like a porn star, only better... better because Billy knows he isn't faking it, isn't playing it up. He rolls his hips, seeking that sweet spot as Billy fucks up into him, his teeth worrying his swollen lower lip as he tries to stifle his cries and fails utterly.

He's beautiful and, in this moment, he belongs to Billy.

They move at a steady pace, Billy punching sweet 'nuhs' out of Steve with each thrust as Steve's mouth drops open and head lulls back at the power and intensity of it. After a moment Billy uses one hand to pull Steve's own away from where they'd been braced against Billy shoulders and tugs them back behind Steve. Steve is forced to use his thighs to balance himself, and Billy wraps his other hand around his

waist to steady him. Steve's thighs tighten with the strain and the feel of Steve's tight hole tensing and milking his cock nearly sends Billy over the edge.

"Billy..."

Steve is bouncing up and down and meeting every one of Billy's upward thrusts and the two of them are seeing stars with every movement. Billy's fingers tighten around Steve's wrists and pull back a little so that Steve arches back, his weeping red cock bouncing against Billy's abdomen. Billy leans forward and nibbles at Steve's nipples, tugging at them with his teeth and then laving his tongue over them to sooth the hurt. Steve lets out a magnificent half-cry, half-moan.

Yeah, the neighbors definitely heard that.

"Pretty slut," Billy murmurs fondly, his voice cracking with desire. "Needed this... needed it hard and fast... my pretty baby..."

Steve groans. "Yeah... needed this. Need your cock. So big... so good... nguhh!"

"I got you, pretty boy. All spread out on display for me. Beautiful little cock-slut, so good for me. You want it harder, baby? Want more?"

"More... oh, Billy. Fucking...fuck...faster... Billy!"

Billy drags it out for as long as he can because it's what they both need - a good fuck to wipe away everything, all the blood and the bullshit. There's nothing but the taste of Steve's sweat and feel of his tight heat, his moans drowning out every other thought.

Billy's orgasm creeps on him almost suddenly, and then Billy is cumming hard in Steve's ass, hot seed shooting up and filling him. Billy thinks he might have gone blind for a moment, but he doesn't stop thrusting as his cum keeps pumping out, and he wraps his free hand around Steve's cock, jerking hard, mercilessly massaging Steve's tender, aching flesh.

Steve screams and a few strokes later blows his load all over Billy's

chest. Spent, he slumps down against Billy, panting, and Billy holds him tightly as they both settle down.

When Steve's breaths start to even out Billy tugs Steve hair and moves his head back so they can make eye contact. He then very deliberately reaches between them, dipping his hand down into their shared mess. His fingers come back up covered in fluid and, holding Steve's gaze, Billy very deliberately licks them clean.

Steve moans in defeat.

"You're going to kill me, Billy Hargrove," he says, slumping over again and burying his face in Billy's sweat-soaked hair. "You're a fucking god of sex and you're going to kill me."

Billy cackles maniacally and decides he won't be replacing the sofa after all.

Notes for the Chapter:

This one is for Jo, who has anxiety and who is always amazing

3. He's licking his lips, he's ready to win

Summary for the Chapter:

Fluffy smut and smutty fluff as the boy fall more and more in love (quick warning: always negotiate kinks in advance and always double check the structural integrity of furniture before you have sex on it).

Much love to Claude Monet.

Billy hates this.

“Well?”

The voice is sharp, expectant. Neil is sitting behind his desk, waiting for his report.

There are no windows in Neil Hargrove's office. There is no view of the outside, no hint at the skyline beyond. A window would leave the head of the Hargrove crime family too vulnerable, too exposed.

Billy, for his part, loves windows, and open doors, and driving in his car with the wind in his hair, and skylines. When there are no windows in a room he tends to feel trapped.

This room has no windows. It is just stained wood and cigar smoke and the dark eyes of men who are older than Billy, who are more in control of themselves and those around them. No natural light, no space, no air.

Billy sits in an uncomfortable leather chair in front of his dad's desk, and he might as well be a junkyard dog standing in front of an ancient stone idol. He hates this with everything inside of him, but he doesn't let it show.

Father and son are not alone. Tommy is lurking behind him, and another of his dad's cronies, but Billy pays them no mind. They aren't the most dangerous things in the room.

Billy is the second most dangerous thing in here, of the four of them.

This is as it should be. God knows he's worked hard enough and long enough to prove that he is dangerous and to make sure that everyone knows it. This need to be monstrous has cost him. It has cost others.

But in a way it doesn't matter... the only way you're safe is if you are the *most* dangerous thing. Anything below that is just part of the food chain. Prey for something, for someone else.

Billy's 'business meeting' last week had yielded some interesting results, some information that could potentially shed light on an uptick in property damage and violence against the Hargroves. One business had been torched, another robbed, and some very lucrative side-projects were now temporarily suspended pending further inquiry.

"He was a runner for the Demogorgon Gang," Billy supplies. Neil shakes his head at the name. Billy, too, has to admit that it's a childish moniker for one of the most vicious up-and-coming criminal organizations in the city, "...but he admitted that most of their major funding comes from someone else. They're being bankrolled by someone big."

"Did he tell you who?"

"He..." Billy shifts uneasily. This one's on him. Him and his temper and that damn red mist that rises when he loses control. "He didn't. Fucker died on me."

Neil's eyebrows twitch and Billy knows he's unhappy. He scrambles to cover his ass.

"But, look, I checked around. There aren't loads of people with that kind of dough. I talked to this dancer I know, and she said there's this family called the Flayers. Mike Flayer is the guy in charge of everything. They own a club... The Upside Down. I can go and check it out..."

"No," Neil interrupts. "Tommy can do that. I don't need you getting sidetracked."

Billy swallows the slight, swallows the sting, and tilts his head

slightly in acquiescence. Neil jerks his chin and both Tommy and the other minion scuttle out of the room, presumably to carry out their assigned tasks.

Billy is not dismissed. He waits in silence while Neil stands and pours himself a drink, his back to his son. He does not offer Billy a drink. After a long moment Neil speaks again.

“This... dancer friend of yours?”

“Yeah.”

Neil turns and fixes him with a cold glare. Billy doesn't want to submit to it, but after a long and awkward silence, he has to look away.

“She's just someone who works at the club,” Billy says, sullen and ashamed and resentful as hell that he feels guilty for knowing someone like that, even in a casual way. That his father can make him feel guilty. Dirty.

“I see. Well, remember what I've told you before about whores. At least it's a woman this time. And we won't be having another *incident*, will we?”

Billy doesn't answer. He's boiling with hate... hate for Neil, hate for himself.

He doesn't let it show. He can't let it show.

He remembers the *incident*. Of course he does. It had been such a strange collection of *moments*, a technicolor picture show of misery. Personal, private, unspoken pain. Billy's pain... a long time building up, a long dark night of the soul culminating in that one terrible breakdown.

He hadn't been able to separate himself from himself, to pull himself up from the blood and the shit. He'd been haunted by bloody visions, and the ghost of his mother who had died ages ago, and all his coping mechanisms, all his much lauded power, had failed him. Black smoke started filling his nose and his mouth and his heart, drilling into his skull, behind his eyes, and then... a mistake... he tried to run.

He remembers a dingy hotel room just outside of town, and the cocktail of chemicals he'd dumped in his bloodstream to try to quiet the noise, and a beautiful boy who was nobody and nothing but who had smiled and been kind, and a terrible, ugly spiral of self-loathing, of depression, ending finally in an overdose and a trip to the ER.

When he came-to Neil was sitting beside his hospital bed, waiting and watching and waiting.

Waiting until Billy thought he was in the clear, waiting until Billy was home from the hospital. Neil picked him up when he was discharged and driven him back to his apartment. He'd even helped his son down the hall and opened his front door for him. Billy had walked through the door and the moment he was inside Neil had given him the worst beating of his entire life.

No hospital afterwards. No hospital for disappointments, for broken boys who embarrass their fathers with their weakness. Just Billy, alone, in agony, locked in his lovely, expensive apartment, trying to stitch himself back together. And the beautiful boy had just... disappeared.

Neil never spoke of it except obliquely, as a veiled threat. He'd had no need to do otherwise. The most dangerous thing in the room doesn't have to explain why he is dangerous.

He's talking now, yammering on, some bullshit about how important it is that Billy take care of his responsibilities.

No distractions, no fuck-ups. No weakness. Never weakness. Gangland tensions are simmering now, and we all have to do our jobs.

Watch your back, Billy. Watch your front.

Billy nods, swallows, submits.

Neil walks over and stands in front of Billy. Billy can't look him in the eye.

"Listen to me, son," Neil says in a voice that makes Billy's skin crawl. "You are a disappointment to me. I have long accepted that that will

never change. However, in this business you need to present a united front and that is why, despite being a cock-sucking fuck-up, you're not lying in a gutter somewhere."

In the ensuing pause Billy is forced, by the tension in the room and by his own fear of his father, to look up.

Neil lifts his eyebrow and takes a step forward, looming over his son.

"What's the most important thing in the world, Billy?"

Billy's mouth is as dry as a bone and all his focus is going into keeping himself from shaking. He has to swallow twice before he can speak.

"F...Family."

"I'm sorry," Neil says, his voice never changing tone or volume. "I didn't catch that."

Billy sees his mistake immediately.

"Family, sir."

Neil nods.

"The minute one of your little fuck toys get in the way, Billy..."

Neil doesn't need to finish his sentence. Billy hears him loud and clear, and his mind flashes, unbidden, to a cozy sweater and swollen lips and long fingers stained with paint.

"Do you know why I've called you in here today?"

"Because I'm a dedicated educator and you're pleased to have me as part of this fine academic community?" Steve offers warily, adjusting his glasses.

Principal Hopper fixes Steve with an unamused look and Steve

cringes slightly. After a moment, satisfied that his troublesome little art teacher is sufficiently cowed, Hopper sighs and taps the paper in front of him with exaggerated patience.

“You dealt with an altercation a week ago between Maxine Hargrove and James Brenner. Mr. Brenner called *and* came in to see me about it. A real delightful way to spend an afternoon, let me tell you. Your name was mentioned several times...”

“Am I going to get fired?” Steve blurts out suddenly. “I know...”

“I’m talking, Steven,” Hopper barks. “That means you are not.”

Steve's mouth snaps shut and he slumps back down in his chair.

Hopper sighs again, shakes his head. He reaches into his desk and pulls out a box of cookies.

“I have to hide these in here,” he explains. “Otherwise Flo will confiscate them. She wants me to eat fruit... *apples*. Like I’m a goddamn rabbit.” He takes a cookie and then pushes the box to Steve. “Sorry for snapping, Harrington. Force of habit. Nobody ever comes into this office to tell me what an excellent job we’re all doing here and how great everything is. All I get is the nasty kids and their nasty parents.”

Steve risks taking a cookie from the box and nibbles on it, still wary.

“Hell, I’m only doing this because I flunked the police medical,” Hopper continues, leaning back in his chair and waving his free hand. “I don’t even like kids. Except my kid, of course.”

Steve can’t help but smile a little. He also likes Hopper’s kid... El... quiet, fierce little El. Hopper sees the smile and nods as if that confirms something he already knows.

“She likes your class. She doesn’t warm up too quick to most people... not after all the things she went through.”

Steve winces and nods. He knows only a little about what El’s life had been like before Hopper adopted her, but the little he does know is more than enough.

“She’s been writing about it a bit in her class journal. For English.”

“I know. It’s helping her vocabulary a lot, that assignment. My point is that she likes you, and she doesn’t like loads of people. And I usually tend to give the people she likes the benefit of a doubt. Besides, I don’t like parents coming into my office when I’m trying to nap and telling me my business.”

Hopper’s eyes narrow and he fixes his gaze on Steve.

“You’ve heard about the Hargroves, haven’t you?”

Steve looks at Hopper blankly. “Um. Maxine is in my class. Her family is in garbage. Right?”

Hopper’s mouth twitches up and he sighs.

“This... altercation. It was handled correctly?”

Steve swallows. “Maxine has detention all this week and both Max and Jamie have written letters of apology.”

“And Mr. Brenner?”

Steve pauses, takes another bite of his cookie, and shrugs. “He was an asshole, Mr. Hopper.”

Hopper snorts, then nods. “Alright. Well, if he comes in again I can say in all honesty that I’ve discussed it with you, so that should get him off both our backs. Flo’s gonna give you a form on your way out... if you could put it all in a letter and attach it for the files, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure,” Steve stands to leave, and then pauses. “Mr. Hopper?”

“Yep?”

“What about the Hargroves?”

Hopper doesn’t do him the disservice of asking him to repeat or clarify the question. Instead he fixes Steve with an evaluating gaze and shrugs.

“Who knows, Harrington? They’re probably no better or worse than anyone else in this town. If they got their money and power through shady deals and intimidation then they’re not much different from most politicians.”

“They didn’t,” Steve interrupts. “Maxine is great. So is...” he cuts himself off abruptly... but not quite quickly enough.

“So is...?” Hopper asks, eyebrow raised.

“So is her family. The family I met. Her brother came to her parent-teacher conference.”

Now, Principal Jim Hopper is no fool. He has been an educator for years, and there isn't much that gets past him. Steve takes another bite of his cookie, very nearly convinced that it will be the last thing he does as an employee of Hawkins Prep. However, Hopper does not tell Steve he is fired, and he does not try to shame Steve or expose him. He has been around young people too long to think that would ever work. Instead, he sighs one last time and fixes the art teacher with his best *'I may be a principal but I could have been a cop in another life and don't you forget it'* gaze.

“Be careful, Steve,” Hopper says very seriously. “You’re a good guy... maybe too good. There are people in this world, and I’m not naming names, who might take advantage of that.”

“I have been around the block once or twice, sir,” Steve says dryly, ignoring the little niggle of doubt in his chest. “No offence.”

“Well then,” Hopper gives Steve a small smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Guess there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I think we should stop doing this here.”

The statement comes out much weaker than Steve means it to... more of a murmur than an ultimatum. He had worked himself up and into a finely-wrought state of anxiety before Billy had arrived, but now

that Billy is here and pressed up against him and smelling like sex and some fancy aftershave all that earlier conviction was evaporating.

“Hmm?” Billy looks up from where he is sucking bruises onto Steve’s neck and palming Steve’s ass through his slacks.

“I said I think we shouldn’t do this at the school anymore,” Steve makes a face and pushes Billy away just a little. “Hardly the most professional thing ever... and I think Hopper’s onto us.”

“Oh dear,” Billy, for his part, doesn’t sound at all concerned. In fact, he goes back to attacking Steve’s throat as though Steve hadn’t said anything at all. Hopper is small potatoes compared to the monsters Billy has had to tussle with this morning alone.

“He’s definitely going to fire me if he finds out.”

Billy shrugs and gives Steve’s ass a little squeeze.

“It’s serious!”

“Alright... alright,” Billy groans against his skin. “Last one for the road, though, okay? Please, Steve... I want...”

“At least... let me... lock...” Steve finally manages to pull himself away from his lover and scramble over to the door of his classroom. It’s after school and the kids should all be in play rehearsals with Carol, but you can’t be too careful. He checks that no one is loitering outside and then closes and locks the door, taking a moment, after he does so, to press his head against the frame and catch his breath.

It’s probably not a good thing that his mind always seems to turn to mush around Billy.

“Steve...please,” Billy is behind him, panting. Steve turns and sees that he already looks wrecked, and the sight gives Steve a rush, a heady feeling of power. Of course, he’s not much better off. He almost leaps the few feet back to Billy’s arms, running his hands up the hard muscle and peppering his mouth and face with kisses.

“On the desk,” Billy demands after a moment of heavy petting. “Bend

over.”

Steve doesn't hesitate.

He goes to the desk, plants his hands on the edges, and leans over it... within seconds Billy is pressed up against him, his arms wrapping around and undoing his belt, his pants, pushing them down so Steve is exposed. Billy pushes his crotch against Steve's ass and Steve lets out a low, loud moan at the feel of his erection.

“Feel that,” Billy murmurs, his breath hot against Steve's ear. “That's what you do to me, pretty boy. That's all for you.”

“Mmffh... please, Billy. Want it...”

Billy takes out a single-use packet of lube from his pants pocket and opens it, drips it on his fingers and starts working Steve open, quickly yet thoroughly.

“I'll take my time later, baby,” he murmurs as Steve's breath hitches, his hips stuttering forward and back as he tries to adjust to the stretch. “I'll stretch you out on my bed and take you apart until you're screaming for me to give it to you. I just can't wait right now, sweetheart. I needed to be inside you hours ago.”

Steve groans and pushes back against Billy's fingers.

“Me too... work's hard, I just keep thinking about you... can't even go near the janitor's closet now... I want you to take me apart.”

“I want to, pretty thing. I want you.”

Billy buries his face in Steve's neck, pumping his fingers in and out of Steve's hole. Steve's holding onto the desk with both hands like it'll keep him grounded and steady, each exhale a soft 'nuh' noise.

An idea occurs to Billy – it's maybe a stupid idea, but then again Billy has always been a risk taker. He leans in and whispers in Steve's ear...

“Daddy gets what he wants, doesn't he, baby?”

Steve stiffens for only an instant – it's the first time they've introduced that kind of pet name into the equation. And what a pet name...

He holds himself still and waits for some inevitable negative association... a feeling, a sign, anything... discomfort, shame, anxiety, disgust. He doesn't feel any of that.

(He'll think later that he really *should* be annoyed about this... he'd told Billy about his father and what he had said, after all, and that's no small thing. That could be a trigger or a sore point, and their sexual attraction doesn't change the fact that Steve's dad is a looming monster in his mind. But maybe that's why it works, Steve thinks. There's something kind of right in taking a thing like that and remaking it utterly. And there's also something in Billy's tone of voice when he says it that saves it - he's just as desperate, just as into it, just as vulnerable as Steve. Either way Billy is playing with fire. Of course, Steve is also figuring out pretty quickly that that's exactly the way Billy likes to play.)

The word sets off a kind of low burning heat in his belly that quickly relaxes him again. The word makes him feel warm and small and wanted and... cared for, somehow.

"Yes," he whimpers. He turns slightly and meets Billy's gaze, brown meeting blue. "Yes."

"Yes what?" Billy presses on relentlessly. All or nothing. With the two of them it's always all or nothing. When Steve doesn't answer right away Billy's hand drifts down to Steve's balls and gives them a gentle squeeze, letting him know who is in control.

Steve gasps in pleasure and Billy kisses his temple.

"Yes what, sweetheart?"

"Yes daddy," Steve moans. "Yes...daddy gets what he wants."

"Yes, he does," Billy removes his hands from Steve and frees himself from his pants. He positions his cockhead at Steve's entrance, teasing but not entering. Not yet. Steve tries to push back but Billy holds him

firmly in place.

“Not just yet, baby. Don't worry, I got you. Daddy wants you, sweetheart. Daddy wants you to moan and beg and cry with how good it feels. Such a pretty boy... gonna be good for daddy.”

Billy finally pushes in and Steve lets out a high-pitched keening sound, gripping the sides of the desk desperately.

“You're so beautiful, so perfect. Daddy's going to take care of you.”

“I want to take you out tonight,” Billy says as he straightens his shirt and redoes his cuffs. His suit jacket is safely draped over one of the student's desks, but he'll have to send this shirt out to be cleaned... he's gotten glue from Steve's desk on it, somehow. At least he hopes that's glue.

Steve is cleaning himself up as best he can and straightening his desk. He silently thanks whatever deity protects idiots in love that he is a teacher and thus always armed with wet wipes, because there is ejaculate all over...

Steve is so preoccupied with hiding the evidence that it takes him a moment to hear what Billy has said. Billy has not phrased his statement a request, but Steve can't resist the urge to push his buttons a little.

“Let me guess...” he turns and waggles his eyebrows. “There's an all-male version of The Hurricane? Chippendales as far as the eye can see?”

“Very funny,” Billy grimaces.

Steve grins and then his mirth falters. “Where are we going?”

“It's a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“What kind of...” Yeah, the shirt is ruined. Billy tugs his on jacket in annoyance. “I’m taking you to the city dump, Steven! Happy? It’s gonna be nice surprise... what kind of question...?”

“Is... is it fancy?”

Billy finally notices the hitch in Steve’s voice and turns to focus on him. He’s doing that thing where he’s wrapping his arms around himself and not quite meeting Billy’s gaze. He’s done this before. It’s nervousness. Insecurity. It’s not Steve... not the Steve Billy likes, not the one he wants. Not the one who is gentle and sweet but also happy and comfortable and *here*.

It’s Billy’s own fault. He’d thought he wanted a shy, submissive Steve, and he had dangled his suits and his car and his club in front of him and tried to make him feel small, and in doing so he’d turned into every asshole who had ever rejected Steve or treated him badly.

Jesus, he’d turned into Neil. No wonder Steve thinks it’s a set-up.

It won’t do.

He steps over slowly, signaling his movements in advance like Steve is a skittish horse, and cups the teacher’s face in his hands. He lets his palms drift down Steve’s neck and up again, soothing and comforting.

“It’s a little fancy,” he admits. “Nothing too wild. Nothing that’ll make you uncomfortable, I promise.”

“I don’t...” Steve stops, bites his lip and then tries again, still not meeting Billy’s eyes. “Maybe we should just go out for coffee or something. We could get burgers again. I don’t want you to throw your money around because of me. Besides, I don’t have anything to wear for...”

“Shhh,” Billy interrupts, his thumbs stroking Steve’s cheekbones. “What did I say before, baby?”

Steve furrows his brow and looks at him. He’s wracking his brain, trying to think back, but he can’t figure out what Billy is talking about. Billy grins.

“Daddy’s gonna take care of you, sweetheart. Daddy wants you and daddy is going to make sure you have everything you could want, everything you need. I’m going to make you happy. I’m not going to let you fall, baby.”

Steve’s eyes glaze over with sheer want and Billy himself isn’t far behind.

Shit. They’ve got it bad.

Steve recovers pretty quickly, though. He quirks his mouth up in that old, familiar self-deprecating half-grin of his and lets out an incredulous snort.

“Daddy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Billy nods, amused but also deady serious. “Because you’re amazing, Steve. Because you’re special and I want to take care of you like you deserve.”

The amusement in Steve’s eyes fades into something more vulnerable, less sure. Billy can’t help but promise himself, wildly and without considering the consequences, that he will protect Steve from all things, from all hurts. That he will cherish Steve as the beautiful, brave, kind teacher deserves.

Billy does not love easily... some would say he doesn’t love at all, that he is incapable of it, that you cannot do the things Billy does and still be human enough to care. Billy himself might say so if asked, and he might even believe it.

But he does love. All things dream and all things are capable of love. And when Billy loves, right or wrong, it is with everything he has.

“You deserve to have someone take care of you,” he says, planting a kiss on the corner of Steve’s mouth.

And I will keep telling you that, he thinks as he walks Steve to his car. I will keep telling you that and showing you that until you believe me. Until I’ve erased your useless ex and your shithole of a father and every person who ever made you feel small. Until all that’s left is Daddy... is me.

Steve makes it home before Billy does, and Billy is still in his car when his phone goes off. He answers it and is immediately greeted with an undignified squawk.

“It was waiting when I got here! Billy! What have you done?”

Steve looks delectable in his new suit, delivered to his door this afternoon much to his surprise and chagrin. Despite his squawking and nay-saying on the phone, he is wearing it and waiting outside of his building in time for their date. It’s hardly the height of formal wear, but he still looks slightly incongruous standing so pretty between a laundromat and a pizza dive in one of the worst parts of town.

Billy thinks that he may have to drag Steve to his tailor at some point just to have it looked over, but he’d managed to get the sizing almost perfect when he discussed it with his man yesterday. This is as it should be... after all, Billy has very exacting tastes, and he has made a careful and complete study of Steve’s body these last few months.

Regardless, the moment he sees Steve Billy makes up his mind to drag him to the tailor’s anyway and order a dozen more suits at the earliest opportunity.

Steve’s spluttering and surprise was half the fun, and it was very cute when Billy picked him up in front of his dingy apartment and Steve had tried so very, very hard not to smile.

“Is the suit really necessary?” Steve asks as he climbs into the Camaro. “Oh god, we’re not going to the opera, are we? Is this where I find out you’re secretly an opera snob? Oh shit, you’re Hannibal Lecter!”

“No,” Billy chuckles, turning up the classic rock station on his car radio as if to emphasize his point. “Not the opera. Maybe the suit isn’t *completely* necessary. Maybe I just wanted to show you off a little. You look great, baby.” He leans over and gives a little tug of

Steve's tie. "Brings out your eyes."

Billy manages to keep his eyes on the road as they make their way downtown, though it's hard going with that brunette beauty sitting next to him like a delicious treat waiting to be devoured. The messy hair, the glasses, and the distracted look are gone – Steve has styled his thick locks and dolled himself up tonight. He fills out his new clothes beautifully. In his weaker moments Billy finds his gaze making it's way up Steve's long, lovely form before finally settling on his beautiful lips, the moles on his skin, the chocolate brown eyes looking at him like he's a king.

They don't say much to each other, content to sit in comfortable silence while Sting plays on the radio.

Steve has managed to paste a veneer of calm on his surface but Billy can see that he is radiating nerves underneath, is twitching with that old fear that he's not up to scratch, that he's going to let someone down. It's ridiculous - if anyone has nothing to worry about, looking as gorgeous as he does, it's Steve.

Billy feels a ping of annoyance but calms himself... he will change this, fix this. He's got time.

Steve is his, even if he doesn't know it yet, and because he belongs to Billy he's got nothing to be afraid of... not now, not ever. Whatever Steve fears – failure, embarrassment, inadequacy – Billy won't allow it to touch Steve in any way. With Billy by his side no one would dare question him, and behind closed doors Billy will make Steve feel like the prince he is.

Steve is his. In time Billy will make him see and understand what that means.

Finally, Billy pulls up in front of the venue and gets out, tossing his keys to the valet and meeting Steve on the other end of the sidewalk.

The teacher is glancing around but he still hasn't picked up on where they are going.

"Okay," he mutters to himself, trying to figure it out. "It's all

museums. The Opera is down there. I swear to God, Billy, if you're taking me to..."

Billy shushes Steve before he can get himself too worked up. He tugs him closer, gently, and plants a small kiss on his cheek before meeting his gaze. Truth time.

"I don't know anything about art," Billy says. Steve tilts his head in confusion at the non-sequitur, and then his eyes widen in understanding as Billy gestures towards the gallery they are standing in front of.

"I didn't mean to make you nervous about it being a little cultured..." Billy continues. "If it helps, this is new for me too. I'm more used to booze and clubbing... I'm sure that'll come as no surprise to you. And, yeah, I don't know anything about art, except that I like yours very much. But when I was driving past here the other day I saw a billboard with that painting with the bridge and the flowers..."

"Monet's 'Water Lilies'," Steve prompts, his eyes sparkling.

"Yeah, that... and it reminded me of your paintings, so I thought..." Billy shuffles a bit. He feels suddenly wrong-footed, unsure... maybe this is a silly, stupid idea. He's felt anxious before, God knows, but he's never felt this kind of gentle, fluttering nervousness that seems to brighten and swell with Steve's smile.

"They're having a special exhibition with those paintings. I booked a private evening viewing. It's really nothing crazy, it's..."

Steve's mouth is on his before he can finish... a quick kiss before he pulls away shyly.

"Thank you," he says.

Billy feels strangely thrown by the gesture, pleased and touched in a way he hadn't expected to be. He takes a moment to collect himself and then nods.

"Okay then," he says, his usual witty quips nowhere to be found. "Shall we?"

They are both in a strange mood when they get home from the gallery.

Billy takes them uptown back to his penthouse apartment... it is the first time Steve has seen it. Billy has the top two floors of the building all to himself. He points out the area across the hall where his private office is, then lets them into the actual apartment. He shows off his kitchen and the ridiculously large living room, the view of the city skyline.

Steve hums appreciatively, especially when he sees the view, but neither of them say much beyond the essentials. They have spent the evening looking at lovely things, and it has left their souls both elevated and sated.

Even Billy discovered a newfound appreciation for the works of artists he never knew existed before now.

How could he not have done when Steve was explaining their different brush techniques to him in his gentle, patient voice, sharing his enthusiasm and insights?

How could he not love Monet when he saw that familiar form and pale skin and mop of brown hair framed against the blues and greens and purples of painted water lilies?

How could he not be swept away when Steve's eyes shone with unabashed joy, when they locked onto his and warmed with appreciation for the gift Billy had given him?

They were there for a few hours. After a brief introduction by the museum curator they'd been offered glasses of champagne and left to roam the halls as they wished. Security was nearly invisible, and Billy felt secluded and comfortable enough to engage in light PDA as they strolled around.

Billy hadn't thought there was such contentment to be found in walking through rooms empty of people and full of art, his lover's

long, clever fingers interlaced with his own, quietly absorbing the beauty around them, sipping their drinks as they gazed up at painted canvases.

And now...

Now the tour of the penthouse is finished, and Steve stands there watching him with his small, gentle smile.

Billy takes Steve's hand and leads him to the bedroom. They undress in silence... Steve finishes first and presses himself to Billy's back, peppering his shoulder with soft kisses.

Billy kicks off his pants and pulls Steve to the bed and is quickly tucked in with his back against Steve's chest as they lay down, a little spoon. It is an unusual position for him, but he finds that he likes it. The feel of his back against Steve's chest, skin against skin, is electrifying.

Steve leans over just long enough to find the lube in the nightstand drawer and coat his fingers with it. He rubs his fingers together to warm them and then reaches down to press them gently against Billy's hole.

They are still on their sides so maybe it is not the best angle for this kind of thing, but the lack of leverage also means that they can go slow. It creates an unexpected feeling of intimacy, these gentle motions and the feeling of being entwined in the arms of another. Steve is pressed so close to Billy that Billy wonders how he can move at all... but he does move, keeping up a steady pace, first with his fingers and then with his cock.

The pleasure builds wonderfully slowly.

Billy lets himself be loved, lets himself be worshiped, lets himself share this moment, gives himself over to Steve's pleasure and his own. It's lovely being filled this way, that slow stretch and then the anchoring pressure, the steady rhythm, and Steve's whispered chanting of his name – *billybillybilly* – in his ear.

There is so much beauty in the world, and all of it is in front of him

now. Bright colors and shapes and motion made real in pencil and paint flash behind his eyes as his lover pants into his neck, as their sweat and their precum mixes and melds, as the friction builds, as they become one.

Steve's hands are on his cock then and it feels so good, like he is being rocked, like they are both being rocked and cradled together, gentle as the ocean waves. Billy's orgasm is a slow climb, and when he reaches his peak he cries out softly and surrenders to it.

As the final pulses of his climax ease off, he turns his head suddenly and kisses Steve on the mouth, his tongue demanding entrance, his soul demanding completion. Steve bites Billy's lower lip and cries out, and in a moment his cum is filling Billy, hot and sweet.

They curl up together afterwards, and it is the first time they sleep beside each other through the whole night.

The next few weeks are busy for Steve.

His students have their theatrical extravaganza. Liza only partially stumbles over the word 'mitochondria', and Dustin doesn't accidentally destroy any set-pieces (again).

The kids submit their science fair projects. Steve collects their English journals to read through. A major math test needs grading. Hopper doesn't hear back from Brenner, and he doesn't give any more relationship advice to Steve. Max serves her detention and get a B+ on her math test. El's vocabulary continues to improve.

Billy brings Steve take-out food at odd times of the day and night and introduces him to cigars and tries to distract him when he's working by bringing gym clothes when he visits and doing his work-out routine on the floor of Steve's apartment. He is pretty successful in this, and it takes Steve at least three times longer than usual to complete his grading.

Steve starts working on a portrait of Billy... quietly making sketches

when Billy visits without calling attention to it or to himself, working on his canvas after Billy goes home. It's not a secret, exactly. More like a way of processing everything. Steve has always felt things strongly, sometimes overwhelmingly so, and it helps to have a way of expressing in paint what he can't express otherwise.

Steve finds himself falling in love with Billy's snide teasing, and his generosity, and his thoughtfulness, and the way he eagerly consumes booze and food and sex and life, and the way he can't keep his hands and his mouth off Steve, and his secret childishness, and his rare moments of vulnerability.

He loves that Billy falls asleep whenever he puts a movie on, sprawled out over the whole couch. He loves that Billy brightens every room he walks in to without even trying, and that he gives Steve some of that sunshine to hold on to. He loves Billy's restlessness, his spark, his ability to make even ordinary events seem like adventures.

He thinks he may be falling in love with Billy.

The next few weeks are difficult for Billy.

The Demogorgons are on the move, bankrolled by some new players, the Flayer Family. The situation escalates, and violence and destruction pick up around the city. The Hargroves are hit, and they pay it back in kind. Tommy barely makes it back alive from The Upside Down nightclub. Neil is fuming, a deadly volcano waiting to erupt.

Billy works long, terrible hours. He's up all night causing mayhem and mischief and up all day covering his tracks and placating his father. There are only two constant anchors in the chaotic whirlwind that his life has become - driving Max around and seeing Steve.

Billy is torn whenever he is with Steve. Sleep is hard to come by and Steve is one of the few people he can sleep with... not just sex but

sleep, real *sleep*, sleeping next to someone without fear or bad dreams. At the same time he's almost frantic not to miss a moment of time with his lover, not to lose any of Steve to unconsciousness.

He finds himself daydreaming about Steve living with him... Steve could quit his job and paint full time. They could go away together, leave all this behind. He doesn't say anything to anyone, least of all his lover, but in his quieter moments he finds himself entranced by a vision of a smiling Steve lounging on a tropical island somewhere, wreathed in sunlight.

Billy finds himself falling in love with Steve's awkward insecurity, and his gentle hands, and his strange, sharp insights that illuminate the beauty of other people, and the way he mumbles to himself when he's working, and his secret stubbornness, and his unending courage.

He loves that Steve is unabashedly awestruck when he watches Billy work out. He loves that Steve talks and listens to him, that he collects funny things, silly things, sad things and special things and saves them up to share with Billy at the end of the day. He loves Steve's patience, his care, his ability to make Billy feel like he's come home.

He thinks he may be falling in love with Steve.

There are a bad few days, and Billy has to cancel on Steve twice.

The first time is just inconvenient and Billy is confident he can make it up... the second comes after an altercation with Neil. No fists this time but by the end of the meeting Billy is so terrorized and drained that can barely pull himself together enough to call. He makes himself do it anyway.

He brushes off Steve's questions and concern... he doesn't need babying right now. He needs to toughen himself up, to shield himself, to push away all *weakness*, and it may be that to do that he has to push Steve away in the process.

The rest of the day is a swirl of regret. Billy goes to his office and

drinks and reads deathly-dull reports for their legitimate business fronts and tries to prepare himself for the ugliness that will shape his night tonight.

Neil and the Demogorgons instead of Steve. Wet-work instead of lovemaking (or sleeping, or eating, or watching TV, or any of the stupid, ordinary things that are sometimes the best of all... when Billy gets to do them with Steve).

He'll have to make it up to Steve.

Or maybe his boyfriend (*boyfriend? Are they dating? Billy Hargrove doesn't date, everyone knows this, and Neil had thrown such vitriol his way this morning that all Billy had wanted to do was scrub his skin off with steel wool and hide away and die, maybe, maybe just die, because what's the point? Billy is incapable of love, he's weak, a disappointment, a ruined wreck, he doesn't date...*) will just catch on that Billy is an unreliable shitbag and drop his ass.

It's what he should do. It's what they both ought to do.

Billy doesn't usually get this low, but today is a very bad day.

There's a knock on the door. Billy isn't expecting anyone, but he barks out an "it's open" anyway, without thinking. He's shocked by who walks in.

"Steve?"

It is, in fact, Steve... strolling in with a markedly casual air, a small smirk on his face and a plate of cookies in his hand.

"Busy?" he asks, his tone as nonchalant as the rest of him.

Steve, why are you here? I'm poison, go away...

Billy mutely shakes his head, as much to shake away the cobwebs of his own self-loathing as to signal to Steve that he is, in fact, not busy.

"Good. Was hoping you weren't in a meeting or anything. This is your office, huh?" Steve looks around, one hand in his pocket, the other still holding the plate. He grins. "It's nice. Didn't get to see it on

the grand tour.”

“What are you doing here?” Billy asks, keyed-up and anxious. This is his private office and while no one from his dad’s business usually comes here (you go to see Neil, he doesn’t come to see you), you can’t be too careful. He stands and moves quickly around Steve, closing and locking the door.

“Brought you cookies. Made them for tonight, but since you cancelled I thought I’d bring them over anyway so you wouldn’t be denied any chocolaty goodness. You don’t have a meeting or anything right now, right? Is it okay for me to be here?” Steve asks, watching him.

“Yeah,” Billy says flatly, trying to drag himself back from the knife’s edge. “No, I don’t have a meeting... and it’s... fine. Like you said... not a secret.”

“But discrete,” Steve fills in, his brow furrowing slightly. There is no judgement in his tone but something in Billy bristles in resentment at the implication that Billy can’t have visitors in his own space. He is angry at Neil for making him feel this way, and at himself for allowing himself to feel this way. He’s angry at the shadow of doubt that falls across Steve’s face.

Billy silently shakes his head after a moment and kisses the teacher, softly at first, then with more hunger.

“It’s fine,” Billy assures him when he pulls away. “My dad is... I don’t want him to know yet. He’s...”

“A bigot,” Steve supplies, and though Billy winces he can’t deny it. Steve’s mouth twists up in sympathy and he puts the cookies down on a small coffee table.

“And the other people I work with... I’m not sure...”

“Hey,” Steve puts his hands reassuringly on Billy’s face. “It’s cool. I don’t mind.”

“What are you doing here, Steve?” Billy asks again, checking his watch. It’s only two in the afternoon, too early for school to be out.

"It's a half-day," Steve assures him. "Don't worry, Max is in Science Club... I usually help out with that, but I talked my friend Carol into covering for me. I wanted to give you your cookies and check in is all. Thought I'd sneak over and say hi," he steps away from Billy and slips out of his jacket, setting it on a chair and casually walking around the office.

"Gosh, that's a big desk," he says, apropos of nothing.

"Yeah..." Billy relaxes a bit. He glances at the plate of cookies and something inside of him eases a bit at the kind gesture. He's very happy to see Steve, though at the same time it feels weird to have his lover here on a day like today. He moves back behind his desk and takes a seat. "Yeah, this is it... where the magic happens. Sorry I had to cancel earlier. And before."

"S'okay. Work's work."

"Work's hell," Billy mutters grimly, glaring at his papers with something very close to pure venom. "I really am sorry about tonight. My dad is on my ass and it's probably going to be another week before everything dies down enough..."

Steve wanders over to where Billy is sitting and pulls his rolling chair away from the desk. When he looks up he sees that Steve is no longer wearing his shirt.

"The fuck, Steve...?"

"Well... you seemed tense on the phone." Steve says, his mouth spreading in a grin as he leans over between Billy and the desk. Billy can't help but drink in that lovely expanse of pale skin, his mouth quirking up at the sight in spite of himself. Steve leans back and drops something on the desk that looks like a little box or a remote of some kind.

"You sounded really upset about missing our date," Steve continues, still casual as hell. "I wanted to see you and make sure you were okay. And since I'm here now... I was just wondering if maybe I could do something to relax you?"

Steve unzips and pushes down his pants and Billy's mouth drops open.

He is wearing a bright red jock-strap (Billy didn't even know they came in red) and socks and nothing else.

Billy wants to reach up and touch but Steve beats him to the punch. He leans against the desk and puts a foot on the arm rest of Billy's office chair and pushes him further away, giving himself some space to work. He almost slips awkwardly off the desk, but he manages to save it at the last minute and arches his back, swaying his hips and showing off a little.

"I mean..." Steve says, warming to his subject, "I found these things in a drawer in your apartment..."

He turns around slowly and bends over the desk, exposing himself. Billy's heart nearly stops.

He's got a plug... a plug pushed firmly in his ass. Billy recognizes it from his apartment... it's a vibrating one with a remote control. An embarrassing noise escapes him when he realizes this.

"You have to work of course," Steve purrs, throwing a loaded look over his shoulder. "Lots of paperwork, I bet. Maybe we could figure out something where we could spend some time together and I wouldn't be in the way. Hell, I don't even need a chair. I could stay under your desk for a while... keep your cock warm."

He wiggles his ass enticingly, playfully. His long fingers toy with the vibrator's remote before pushing it across the desk. "You can play with this a little. And then maybe when you're done with your work you can bend me over this ridiculously big desk and fuck me until we both forget our names."

Billy likes to think that he's seen and done just about everything there is to do in this wide wicked world... and in fairness he probably has. However, the glamour and shine of his lifestyle had not quite prepared him for the discovery that sweet little white-bread Steve has a full-on kinky streak. Looking at his beautiful, exposed lover, listening to him described their imminent activities...

Those wide eyes fixed on his and those red lips smiled, and it was better than any vice show you could ever find if you searched your whole goddamned life.

How did Billy ever get so lucky? He thinks he might be dreaming. Is he dreaming? Fallen and concussed, maybe? Who cares. Try not to cream your pants.

"Of course," Steve shrugs, "if you really are busy, we can save this for later. I can just go..."

Billy feels a rush of emotion and surges out of his seat then, pulling himself flush against Steve's back and pressing him down hard on the desk.

"Not going anywhere, baby-slut," Billy growls. He grinds his clothed cock against Steve's ass and Steve lets out a helpless whine as the plug pushes against his prostate. Billy wraps his hands around Steve's pretty hair and gives it a tug, pulling him back so Steve is pressed against him, panting, eyes blown wide with arousal.

"Playing with fire, sweetheart," Billy murmurs, pushing his face into Steve's long neck. "Don't dangle these things in front of me unless you're gonna deliver."

"I'm gonna deliver," Steve insists, writhing and gasping in Billy's grip. "Wanna make you feel good... wanna make daddy feel good. You're so sweet and good to me, and you work so hard. Please Billy, I'll be a perfect slut for you."

"Yeah, you will," Billy murmurs, leaning back and pushing Steve down until he's on his knees. He takes a deep breath to calm himself and then sits back in his chair again. He rolls forward, crowding Steve under the desk.

"You'll suck me off first, baby, since you got me all riled up. I don't know where baby got such a dirty mouth, but I'm gonna fill it up."

"Yes daddy," Steve frees Billy from his pants and quickly swallows him down without a moment's hesitation. Billy manages to bury a deep groan at the sensation but allows himself a grunt and a few

upward thrusts, fucking Steve's mouth a little before he forces himself to settle down.

After a moment he remembers the plug and reaches over to set the vibrator remote on the lowest setting. Steve lets out a soft whine.

"If you can make noise then you aren't paying enough attention to my cock, sweetheart," Billy says, trying desperately to keep his voice steady. He risks a glance down to see wide, brown doe-eyes looking up at him, bright with tears, and gorgeous red lips stretched obscenely over his erect member.

"Be good for daddy, baby. He has to concentrate on his work."

Billy starts putting his desk back in some sort of order, though it's slow going when every swipe of Steve's tongue threatens to send him over the edge. Steve paces himself, builds up a good rhythm, tries to take Billy deeper and deeper until he's gagging slightly.

"Shhh, pretty boy," Billy strokes Steve's hair when Steve makes a soft choking noise. "So good, baby. You like sucking daddy's big cock? Easy, baby..."

Steve moans and leans his head back and opens up his throat, taking Billy even further into his mouth. He works his tongue and sucks eagerly, dragging Billy towards the edge.

Billy has just about gotten all his paper clips back in their box when he finally cums, breathless, down Steve's throat. Steve swallows frantically and Billy lets out a loud moan at the sensation. Steve's good... when Billy is finished he whimpers and pulls off for just a moment to catch his breath and Billy can see that he hasn't spilled a drop.

"Water, sweetheart?" Billy murmurs, reaching down and gently stroking his face. God, he looks so fucking pretty like this, lips swollen and wet, face flushed. A tear has managed to escape and Billy brushes it away with his thumb. Steve nods gratefully and Billy leans back to snag a bottle of water from the mini-fridge behind the desk. Steve snorts and raises an eyebrow when he spots it.

“Really, an office fridge? Such a diva,” he rasps, grinning.

Billy chuckles, but he isn't laughing for long. Steve quickly gulps down some water and then promptly wraps his lips around Billy again.

He holds him in his mouth, keeping him warm, suckling gently. Billy is still sensitive from his orgasm but Steve keeps him tenderly enfolded in his wet heat and before too long Billy is half-hard again. One of his hands rests gently on Steve's beautiful, soft hair, caressing it. Billy lets himself relax and enjoy it, reads through his papers, lists and numbers and figures and names, and without absorbing any of the information.

It doesn't matter. Steve is here, comforting and pleasing him. He's fucking gorgeous and he's on his knees, serving Billy like a good little cock-slut, like Billy's sweet and submissive baby boy.

Spread and eager and happy to have Billy filling his mouth and teasing his ass with the vibrator. Aching and wanting and waiting for Billy to give him release. Keeping Billy hard, keeping Billy warm, his tongue savoring the heavy weight and the taste of precum.

He left work early just to come see Billy, just to rile him up and pleasure him. He came because Billy was upset about missing their date and he wanted to make him feel good. Who cares about anything else when daddy's baby is so good to him?

After a while, Billy does as Steve suggested and plays with the remote. He hasn't used it much himself, bought it on a whim, and hasn't experimented with all the settings on it. It's been on low this whole time, but now he studies the dial and turns it up to a higher setting.

Steve's mouth flutters and tightens around Billy's hard member before settling again. Billy can feel Steve swallowing down the noises he so desperately wants to make as the plug massages his insides. At Billy's prompting Steve pulls off and Billy pushes his pants down more so that Steve can lick and suckle his balls for a little while before returning to his cock, just to give Steve a change of pace and something new to focus on.

He turns the dial down and feels Steve relax slightly. He turns it up to the highest setting and Steve can't help it... he yelps, the noise muffled by Billy's cock but still loud and unmistakable.

"Be good for daddy, baby. Be my good little sweetheart."

Steve lets out a soft hiccup-like noise and tries to hold his mouth steady on Billy's cock, even though he can't help jerking his hips forward a little, desperate for some kind of friction. He rubs his hands on his thighs but doesn't dare touch his own erection lest he lose control completely. Besides, daddy didn't say he could cum yet.

Billy leans back a little and watches as Steve struggles. Steve glances up and makes eye-contact, silently begging, but Billy just smiles and enjoys the show. He's half tempted to take a picture but he's pretty sure Steve would actually murder him for that. He settles instead for trying to memorize Steve's wide-eyed look, the vibrating tension of his body, the sight of Billy's hard member disappearing between his lips.

After what must seem to Steve like hours on the edge, Billy tugs at Steve's hair and pulls him, still groaning, off his cock. A dribble of drool and precum trickles down his chin and he lets Billy wipe it away with his thumb.

"Like my cock, baby?" Billy purrs.

"Yes, daddy," Steve whimpers. "Love it so much."

"Let's see what shape you're in, pretty boy. Show me your front."

Steve's eyes are dark with arousal as he leans back under the desk to give Billy a view of his crotch, making sure all of his many assets are on display. Steve's own erection is straining against the fabric of the jock strap, and the red is now darkened and stained by Steve's leaking precum.

"Poor baby. So desperate you've made a mess of yourself. You want daddy inside you, sweetheart?"

"Please daddy," Steve is going for sultry-seductive but he can't keep the edge of raw want out of his voice, that desperate desire to please.

"Need you inside me..."

"Good boy, baby. Stand up and turn around now, and let me see your tight, slutty little hole."

Steve obeys, turning and leaning over the desk to give Billy a good view. Billy studies the vibrating plug, which is still buzzing away quietly inside of Steve, and reaches out to give it a little tug.

Steve cries out as Billy wiggles the plug, his back arching, his hands gripping the desk. "Please daddy!"

"Please what, baby?" Billy asks with a false and wicked innocence.

"Please fuck me!" It comes out almost as a sob. "Please, please, please..."

All Billy's attempts at organizing his desk turn out to be for naught.

Without a second thought he pushes everything off the work-space, every paper and every pen. He lifts Steve up and lays him across it, is on top of him in a moment, his mouth covering every inch of flesh it can find, nipping and sucking at his neck, his chest. Steve nearly rips off Billy's shirt, sending one button after another pinging away from them. He then latches onto Billy's shoulder with his teeth and mouths the skin there, a huffing moan escaping with every exhale. Billy's hands move up to Steve's nipples and he pinches them hard, causing Steve to cry out in pained pleasure.

Billy reaches down to Steve's ass and swiftly removes the plug, throws it across the room in his haste and eagerness. His fingers are back promptly and they find Steve's hole... he is lubed up and wet and open and ready for Billy and Billy groans at the touch, at the promise of that tight heat. He pushes down his pants all the way and lines himself up before pushing in, slowly, savoring every inch. Steve gasps loudly and cries out Billy's name, his hole fluttering and spasming around his cock.

"Okay...?" Billy has no idea how he manages to choke the word out as he sinks deeper and deeper into Steve.

"Ye...ess..." Steve sounds just as wrecked, like he wants to cry and

laugh and scream all at once, like he's just barely holding on. "S'good... s'good, Bi... Billy, please...daddy...!"

"Fuck! So... fucking tight, baby-slut," Billy groans. "All mine."

"All yours, daddy," Steve answers, voice cracking. "Yeh...your good...nuh!... good little slut." He wraps his legs around Billy's hips and pulls himself up and closer until Billy's balls are nestled against his ass. They rock back and forth together for a moment, trying to get a grip, half out of their minds with the sheer intensity of it. Steve finally pushes his belly up a little, his aching cock pressing against Billy, and Billy assumes control.

He uses a free hand to grab onto the edge of the desk and brace himself, and then proceeds to take Steve with slow, powerful thrusts, each one punching a harsh cry out of Steve and a deep grunt out of Billy. The drag, the friction is so good, each push and pull a raw, profound movement. Billy knows the minute he hits Steve's prostate because Steve's eyes go wide and he makes the most gorgeous yelping sound. He lets himself use and own Steve's willing body, giving it to him rough and taking them both to completion.

"T'm..." Steve grunts. He's chewing desperately on his red swollen lips, trying so hard to hold on. "I'm not gonna last... Billy... fuck..."

"Its okay," Billy buries his head in Steve's neck, pressing soothing kisses to the sweat soaked skin, panting and nuzzling and comforting even as he continues pounding Steve's tight hole, laying claim to that silky heat. "You've been so good... so good... not yet, sweetheart."

"Oh... fuck! Please... I wanna cum, please..." Steve sobs so sweetly, his arms tightening around Billy's back.

"Such a good baby, such a good sweetheart," Billy whispers against his mouth. "Mine... mine..." His hand drifts down and slips under Steve's jock strap, latching onto his weeping member.

"Beg me," he hisses. Steve doesn't need to be told twice.

"Please daddy, let me cum! I wanna cum, please! Please! Billy, please!"

“Cum for me, pretty boy,” Billy orders, rubbing his hand over Steve's cock, and Steve obeys a few moments later. He throws his head back and exposes his long neck and cries out loudly, wildly, covering his own chest with cum. He unravels completely, almost sobbing, his hips shifting up and his hole milking Billy's cock as Billy's thrusts continue.

So fucking beautiful, Billy thinks as he gives one last jerking shove and fills Steve with a low moan. His hips stutter, jack-rabbiting with the sensation, loving the feel of his hot cum pulsing out of him, marking his lover, marking his claim.

Billy gives himself only a minute to catch his breath and then props himself up on his hands and looms over Steve like a lion standing over its prey. He watches as Steve whimpers and moans, undone beneath him, his eyes glazed over, his face dripping with sweat and tears and saliva.

So fucking beautiful...

My baby... my sweet, pretty baby...

Mine...

When Billy is fully spent he carefully pulls out, though even with all of Billy's sudden gentleness Steve still lets out a little whimper of protest, a weak whine of need. Billy hushes him softly and leans back to watch as his cum dribbles out of Steve's red, used hole. The sight sends a thrill of possessiveness through Billy. He rubs a finger over the worn muscle and Steve's breath hitches, his hips jerking in a little upward thrust.

“Good boy...” Billy murmurs, pleased by Steve's sensitivity and submissiveness. “So messy. Filled you up good, sweetheart. Owned that sweet little hole. My dirty little sweetheart.”

He raises his fingers to show Steve his mess and without a word Steve grabs his hand and sticks Billy's fingers into his mouth. He sucks lewdly, cleaning the dripping cum of Billy's fingers, and if Billy hadn't climaxed literally two minutes earlier then the sight would have sent him over the edge again. His cock twitches valiantly in interest

anyway, and Billy raises himself up on his knees and tilts his hips forward.

“Clean up your mess, baby.”

Steve doesn't hesitate – he surges up and cleans the remnants of their lovemaking off Billy's cock. He gives Billy's overstimulated member long lapping strokes with his tongue and then takes his whole thing in his mouth, sucking it clean. Finished, he lays back on the desk and groans.

“Fuck that was hot,” Billy sighs, half collapsing on top of Steve, a smile stretched wide across his face.

Steve runs his hands over his eyes and looks up, blinking a little before focusing his gaze on Billy (and it's just Billy now, not 'Daddy'... Billy can see Steve register the shift and is pleased that Steve looks just as content now as he did before). He looks fucked-out but satisfied, and he grins a little.

“You liked it?”

Billy snorts. “If I liked it any more I'd have to get a new office. You're pretty kinky, sweetheart... been holding out on me.”

Steve makes a sheepish face and shivers a little, his drying sweat chilling him.

“Never done something like that before. I know there's etiquette and safewords and everything for that kind of stuff, but I didn't think.”

“Hmmm,” Billy wraps himself around Steve, cradling him and shielding him from the cold. “How long you been planning this, babe?”

Steve goes bright red. “Well, I... this wasn't planned, exactly... I did think about it. I mean...”

Steve trails off, embarrassed, and Billy's grin widens.

“You been fantasizing about this, Steve? You like to think about daddy and his office when you're touching yourself?”

Steve swallows and his eyes dart away. "Yes, daddy," he says in a small, playful voice.

Billy leans down and kisses him deeply, laps into Steve's mouth with his tongue before withdrawing and planting a final chaste peck on his lips.

"So gorgeous," Billy murmurs against his mouth. "How the fuck did I get so lucky?"

"I didn't... I didn't really plan it. I meant what I said – you just seemed so down on the phone. I kind of assumed you wouldn't want to..."

Billy shakes his head and kisses Steve again before leaning back. He should grab them some water, something to clean up with, but he's too pleasantly buzzed to think too hard about it.

"I'm really just super grateful that your desk is so sturdy, to be honest. But I think I might have screwed up your office a little more than I intended," Steve says, leaning over the edge of the desk and eyeing up the scattered debris now littering the floor. "I'll help clean it up... sorry..."

"Nah," Billy drags him back and cages him with his arms. "Leave it. Who cares?"

"I think you should care, it's your work!"

"I don't care," Billy drawls, lazy and sated. "Fuck it. Let's get out of here. Let's go to a movie. You want to see a movie? I haven't been to the movies in ages. We can make-out in the back like a couple of horny teenagers."

"We can't, you've got that thing."

"What thing?"

"The thing! You said you couldn't go out tonight because you had a thing!"

Oh yeah. The meeting with Neil, and then the long night in the

bloody dark. He'd forgotten...

A dark downward spiral, dangerous and seductive... the rage, the fire, the things that used to define him...

Evil, ugly things.

"I don't want to go," he whispers.

For a moment he isn't even sure he said that out loud, but once it's out he doesn't try to take it back. Steve hears him, somehow, and for once doesn't push him to elaborate. He runs his fingers through Billy's hair soothingly and doesn't say anything.

I have to go, Billy thinks. I have to go so I can keep this. So I can keep him.

"Breakfast tomorrow?" Steve asks quietly, interrupting his thoughts.

Steve is struggling to read Billy, and has been struggling throughout this past week. He can't see what's going on in Billy's head... only that he is troubled. Steve is worried that he's being too needy right now, that he's pushing Billy when he wants to be left alone, but he can't help it. He hates when Billy drifts away like this. He wants to help... he wants that so much, but he has a terrible suspicion that he can't help with whatever is bothering his lover.

He'll tell me to leave, now, Steve thinks. I'm not enough for this, I can't fix this. He'll be casual and nice about it, but he'll be off to the next thing soon.

Billy doesn't tell Steve to leave, though. Instead he pulls Steve close and kisses him gently on his forehead, on his nose, and on his lips. He lets his mouth linger, not quite touching, more just breathing in, and then nuzzles Steve fondly.

"Don't you have work tomorrow?" Billy murmurs.

"It's Saturday," Steve reminds him.

And even if it wasn't, I'd come to you. I'd do anything to help you... and isn't that a terrifying thought?

Billy smiles.

“It’s a date, then.”

Notes for the Chapter:

So Billy definitely didn't get his office desk from IKEA...

Guys, the world is a shitshow these days but you are all awesome bits of stardust and you keep me going. Stay amazing, you wonderful ones!

Kudos and comments are always very appreciated.

4. On the hunt tonight for love at first sting

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter warnings for angst and depictions of a gun in a school (but nobody gets hurt) (and also don't bring guns into schools).

“You really didn’t have to do this, you know.”

Billy looks up. He can’t see Steve’s face from here. They are stretched out on Steve’s lumpy sofa. Steve is laying on his stomach, naked from the waist down, and Billy’s face had been, until a moment ago, buried in his ass.

Steve is turned towards the new big-screen TV and pretending to watch something on Netflix. Billy knows for a fact that Steve hasn’t been able to concentrate on whatever show is playing, but he is willing to keep up the act if it makes his boyfriend happy.

“Do what, pretty boy?” Billy asks, his voice gentle and teasing. “Get you the TV? Set it up myself? This...?” He swipes his tongue over Steve’s hole in one long, deliberate move. “Be specific.”

Billy has actually done a number of things these past few weeks in the name of making Steve happy.

They’ve driven around town in Billy’s fast car, gone to dinner, gone to shows. Billy has stretched Steve out on the silk sheets on his bed and worked him over in every conceivable way. Nights that Steve would have formerly spent doing work on his scratched coffee-table and trying to coax hot water out of the dinky shower in his apartment were now full of shared experiences beyond Steve’s imagination. Wherever Billy was, ‘the best of everything’ was sure to be nearby.

There are several bespoke suits in Steve’s closet, despite Steve’s insistence that he’ll never need them (“We’ll see about that,” Billy had muttered ominously), a new easel set in Steve’s work-space (Billy had pointed out the old one had been held together with duct tape,

though Steve had kept it anyway, “for sentimental reasons”), a new sink and dishwasher in the kitchen (in fairness, the old sink had basically exploded, but Billy had turned a month-long maintenance project into a mild inconvenience fixed in a few hours), and of course the new TV, brought in and set up by Billy not two hours ago.

Good liquor and food, up-to-date electronics, beautiful clothes, and other things... things Steve would never have even thought of wanting... had a way of magically appearing in his apartment these days.

All of it amazing. All of it nice. All of it utterly overwhelming.

“All of it,” Steve’s breath hitches.

He’s trying so hard to focus and Billy is making it very difficult. He starts tugging at Steve’s rim gently with his teeth and it’s all Steve can do to breathe without whimpering.

“I mean, thank you,” he tries again. “It’s not that I don’t like it. But you know you don’t have to buy me anything. I’m happy just to be with you. You didn’t have to do any of it.”

Billy recognizes the tone in Steve’s voice and knows immediately what is niggling at Steve’s troublesome sense of fair-play.

Steve never asks for anything. Steve would be happy without all the gifts Billy showers him with.

Steve just wants Billy.

Billy knows this... it’s the truth. It’s one of the reasons he cares so much for Steve... he does value his lover's simple nature even if he can't understand his middle-class pride. It’s not like that for him. It’s always a struggle to make Steve understand that money is nothing to Billy, and that if these gifts give Steve even a moment's pleasure then they are worth double their monetary value to him.

Billy doesn’t want to hear it today. He’s going to have to circumvent this conversation... he doesn’t want to tumble through Steve’s thanks and insecurity and the pretzel-shapes he twists himself into trying to come to grips with things.

Billy has another proposal on his mind.

"Hmm... no, I didn't," Billy agrees easily before pushing his head down between Steve's cheeks again and dragging a low moan from his lover. He's tackling Steve's rim with a kind of academic thoughtfulness, slow and careful and methodical. Each thrust and lick and nibble, and all of Steve's reactions to them, are carefully cataloged in Billy's head.

"Of course," he says, resurfacing briefly, "I was also going to replace this sofa. It's pretty fucking hideous, Steven."

"I know," Steve groans, shift a little to give his swelling cock a little more breathing room. "It's so ugly, I had to have it. I rescued it from the sidewalk, actually, first week I moved in. Someone was throwing it out."

"I bet. Decided against replacing it though, in the end."

"Why?"

"I've grown rather fond of it," Billy smirks, letting his thumb drift down and rub and tug at Steve's spit-wet, relaxed rim, slipping in and out just a little. "I've fucked you on it enough. Added to the collection of stains."

"Jesus..." Steve gives a little groan and bites his lip.

"When you move in with me we should keep it."

"Hardy har."

"I'm serious," Billy says, taking a moment to play with Steve's hole a little more. His heart is in his throat, but he doesn't let on. "A nice little artifact of our early days. We can put the TV in the bedroom. I've been meaning to get a new one anyway."

Steve's brain is hazy with pleasure, so it takes him a moment to process this. When he does, though, he tenses slightly.

"...What?"

Billy ignores him, tries to tongue the tension out of him.

“Wait, wait... stop.”

Billy doesn't want to stop, particularly, but he allows Steve to pull away and roll over on his back to face him since that in turn allows Billy access to Steve's cock and balls. He promptly face-plants into them and begins applying his mouth with the same dedication with which he had tackled Steve's hole.

“Stop, Billy!” Steve's eyes are suddenly wide, and he tugs Billy up a little by the hair. “You said... when I move in with you.”

Billy hums in assent, nuzzling Steve's erection.

“You're asking me to move in with you? Into the penthouse?”

Billy looks up, grinning. “Well, it's a big building. I was thinking... the apartment one floor from down from me just became available.” Billy owns the whole building, in fact, but he doesn't say that. That might stretch even Steve's limits.

“Yeah, and how much would that cost me?” Steve asks grimly.

“Don't be dense,” Billy laps lazily at Steve's cock. “I'll take care of it. I'm going to take care of you.”

“You bought me a TV, that's not... Billy, you're talking about a whole apartment!”

Billy shrugs and licks Steve's cock again.

“I don't... stop doing that! I can't think when you do that.”

“Don't think,” Billy urges. “Move into my building. It's great, Steve... nice part of town, close to the school. You wouldn't have to take two buses to get to work anymore. I've seen the apartment, it's beautiful...”

It's close to me, Billy thinks but doesn't say. It's not above a laundromat with a broken lock on the front door. It has security all over the place. Cameras. Guards. It's protected.

It is (you are) mine.

“We can’t...” Steve murmurs, resolve wavering dangerously. “We’ve know each other... what...?”

“We’ve been fucking for five months,” Billy supplies. “We’ve been dating for almost three.”

“That’s not... that’s not enough... you can’t just...”

“I can,” Billy says, quite seriously. “Steve. Look...” He gives up on trying to pleasure his boyfriend into compliance and instead raises himself up onto his knees so he can meet his gaze.

“Look,” he says. “Before your brain goes down that rabbit hole, you have to know that this isn’t like before. I’m not Joey.”

That maybe comes out harsher than he means it, as an accusation rather than an assurance, judging by the sheepish, slightly wounded look he gets. Bringing up the ex... maybe not the smartest move. Billy plows ahead anyway.

“I understand,” Billy assures him before Steve can interrupt. “I do. You don’t want to be in that place again... stuck in a situation with an abusive asshole. You want to be self-reliant, independent. I get that.”

Well... he does and he doesn’t.

In theory, he gets it. To be honest he feels the same... he hates being dependent on Neil and is always pushing to be free. If he’d been in a relationship where the other person was always needling at him, taking him apart from the inside out, he’d be a bit gun-shy too.

He gets it. Sure.

But Billy also knows in his heart and soul that he isn’t that guy... that asshole... and never would be. Steve is amazing, and he’d never make him feel like anything less. He’d never hurt Steve. Steve is safe with him. Steve is *his*, and he takes care of the things that belong to him. Billy is maybe not the nicest guy, but he is also not an abusive monster.

Of course, another part of Billy... the part that's a bit selfish, a bit childish, that always throws gasoline on the fire and always indulges his worst impulses... that part just wants Steve with him at any cost. That part isn't particularly concerned with the morality of the means... only with accomplishing the desired ends.

That part is watching Steve now like a predator watches prey.

"I do get it. But it would be so much better if you moved in, babe. This place... it's kind of a shithole. It's not where you belong. You belong with me, Steve. We could take this to the next level. Start really *living* together. I'll take care of everything, you won't have to lift a finger."

It all sounds great to Billy, so he doesn't quite understand why Steve's brow furrows and why his gaze drops.

Steve doesn't answer for a long moment, and when he does his tone is hesitant yet strangely firm.

"If you get that... if you really do..." Steve pauses, anxious. "Knowing what you do about me and Joey and my past... you have to understand why I'm not ready for this."

"For fuck's sake, Steve, it's just an apartment..." Billy huffs in increasing annoyance. "It's a smart investment. It's not a ring. It's not even really moving in together. You'd still have your own space..."

"Which you'd be paying for," Steve interrupts. "Which you'd own."

"Unless you're sitting on some money you haven't told me about, yeah! And even if you are, I'd still pay for it. I can afford it, who cares? Is it really so terrible to have me give you something nice?"

"This isn't a nice dinner or a bunch of flowers... or even a TV or a sink! It's an apartment!"

"You don't trust me, is that it?" The idea hurts more than Billy thought it might. "You think this is a game for me? That I'm just doing this to yank the rug out from under you again?"

"Billy," Steve is suddenly aware of his vulnerable position and starts

covering himself up, a move which infuriates Billy further. Billy moves back and allows Steve to shield himself with a throw pillow, but he does not turn his demanding gaze away and Steve is left feeling more exposed than ever.

“Look...” Steve tries. “I went in on the apartment with Joey, and he used that... he used that to keep me from leaving. It became a weapon, and by the end it was like a prison for me. An apartment... that would be your space, not mine. I wouldn’t be able to come and go without you knowing...”

“Where are you planning on going, Steve?” Billy growls. The image of Steve going out to some bar and picking up a stranger, bringing him back to the apartment suddenly rises like a tidal wave in Billy’s mind. His face goes dark... dangerous... and Steve can see it.

“Nowhere,” Steve insists, trying to placate him. “The point is I couldn’t control... I couldn’t ask you to leave or have my own space, or... I can’t...”

“I said I’m not Joey,” Billy growls. This conversation has not gone as planned and now some ugly spark of jealousy and doubt and hurt was igniting a wildfire inside of him. “I wouldn’t do anything like that. It’d be *our* space, I wouldn’t... I’m not that guy.”

No, a nasty little voice inside Billy’s head cackles. *No, you’ve never extorted anything from anybody. You’ve never used money and power and violence to get your way.*

“No,” Steve huffs in frustration. “You’re just the guy with an incredible amount of money who likes throwing it away on people you barely know!”

“I know you, Steve!” Why is he even having to say this?

“No, you don’t! If I move in to that place, you’ll be the one deciding when I stay and when I go... and when I bore or upset you you’ll kick me out and I’ll be left with nothing again. Only that won’t happen because I’m not moving anywhere! I like my apartment and I like my stuff and I like my job and I like *me*. Okay? I like where I am, in every sense. You have to understand...”

“No, I get it,” Billy growls. “You don’t trust me, and this isn’t serious for you, and you’re too chickenshit to accept everything I’m offering you. I’ve done nothing but give and give and give to you, Steve, and it was all for nothing!”

“I am *not*...!”

“You’re a fucking coward!”

“Shut up,” Steve barks, and Billy can see the walls going up around him, shutting Billy out. “I can’t... I can’t move in with you. Not right now. I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Billy wants to hit something very badly right now. He doesn’t... he settles for leaving Steve to his neglected half-erection and storming off to shower in Steve’s bathroom, trying to cool down.

He stands under the lukewarm water and breathes heavily, forcing himself to settle. He can’t lash out. Lashing out won’t do any good...

This is Steve. He’s with Steve.

He isn’t in some anonymous room with his tools and his work and a dead or dying thing stretched out on the floor.

He doesn’t have to hurt this one.

He doesn’t have to break this one.

He doesn’t have to hurt...

Billy feels a strange-familiar stillness wash over him, covering and containing (but not soothing, not extinguishing) the hurricane inside of him. He finishes his shower.

When he gets out he dresses himself with meticulous care, donning his Armani like armor. As he does so he calmly considers a range of solutions to his current problem. He’s the businessman now, not the lover, not the youth. He wants something, and when you want something you need to play rough and tough and cool until it’s yours.

The ends, he has no doubt, will justify the means.

When he enters the living room again Steve is dressed and working at his easel, his back to Billy. He doesn't turn around, and Billy swallows an ugly lump in his throat.

Billy walks over and plants a kiss on the back of Steve's neck. He rests his hands on Steve's shoulders, looming behind him as he studies the painting. It's a portrait of an old man who plays chess in Central Park. Billy was with Steve when he had made his initial sketches, chatting away with the stranger like they were best friends.

Steve's brush drifts down and goes still, propped on his knee. Steve himself is suddenly like a watchful animal, prey going quiet, waiting.

"I'm sorry," Billy says. He's not, though. Oh, he's sorry the conversation didn't go the way he wanted it to... but he's also not about to let this go.

These last few weeks he hasn't been able to stop thinking about Steve, can't stop wanting him... he *needs* Steve with him, needs to know where he is and what he's doing, that he's safe, that he's Billy's. Billy doesn't feel as real and whole when he's without Steve, and he is absolutely desperate to hold on to that feeling. If that means locking Steve away in a tower like a captive princess in a dragon's keep, then a rather unpleasant part of Billy is ready to accept that as a necessary evil.

"I'm not ready, Billy," Steve still doesn't turn around. He twiddles his paintbrush between his fingers. "I'm sorry, I can't. I know you feel sure... I wish I had your certainty. But if this is a deal breaker for you..."

"Stop," Billy growls.

"I'm not ready," Steve whispers. It's such a horrible, difficult thing for him to say. Part of Steve wants to curl up under Billy's displeasure and submit, start packing his stuff up now. But another part, a part that has been stomped on and cracked and broken in the past, and that has healed over a long, lonely stretch of time, can't bend.

No matter how much easier it would be, Steve can't do it.

Billy can see that it's difficult... a part of him sympathizes.

His poor, sweet, troubled teacher.

But Billy doesn't do mercy. He gets what he wants.

He pecks Steve on the temple and makes his way to the door.

I'll call you," he says, his calm voice belying the raging storm both Steve and he know are inside of him. He leaves Steve alone with his TV and his work.

"Jonathan Byers, Clash Photography."

"Jonathan?"

"Hey, Steve! How's it going?"

"Good! Good. How are you? You expecting another call?"

"Nah... I was reliably informed by Nancy that I should start answering my phone in a more professional manner in case someone from the gallery called."

"Nancy?"

"Yeah, Nancy Wheeler. You teach her brother, actually."

"Oh yeah...?"

"We've been hanging out. She's an intern at the Times."

"Jeesh, that's great man! I didn't know."

"You've been MIA these last few weeks."

"... Yeah... I have. I'm sorry..."

"You've been seeing someone and now it's gone to hell."

“...”

“Right?”

“How the fuck do you do that...?”

“Well, for starters, you’ve been MIA these last few weeks... and now you’re calling me out the blue... for advice, I assume?”

There is no judgement in Jonathan’s voice, and something in Steve eases. There is never any judgement, even though Jonathan knows all the worst parts of Steve, has seen all his faults and insecurities in action. It’s why Steve can say, without fear...

“I think I fucked up.”

Jonathan listens as Steve spins him his tale. It’s a romance, of course. Steve and love... not a surprise. Steve is a romantic. Even when he isn’t in a relationship he radiates a kind of generous affection. Steve should always have someone, Jonathan thinks. He’s seen Steve struggle alone for far too long – it’s a waste. Steve should always have the opportunity to love and be loved.

He recognizes Billy Hargrove’s name immediately... he hangs out in much seedier places than Steve does. As he listens, he considers telling Steve what he knows, what he’s heard about the Hargroves, what the street has been whispering.

He doesn’t though. It is not because he doesn’t care about Steve. On the contrary, he loves Steve very much, and considers the hapless, gentle, wonderful moron a member of his family.

He doesn’t tell him about Hargrove because he suspects that Steve already knows. He suspects that Steve has been told in one way or another and that Steve doesn’t want to accept it. Steve believes in the good in people, and Jonathan knows that he is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to defend the ones he cares about... even from his own doubts.

And Jonathan does think that Steve loves Billy. He can hear it in his voice.

He also doesn't tell him because it's not the real issue right now.

"I told him no..." Steve sighs, and Jonathan can almost hear him rubbing his face in frustration. "I basically told him to get out."

"Do you regret it?" Jonathan asks.

"Of course I do! He just... he went so... he hasn't called and... I lo... I don't want to lose him. And now I have, and..."

"So, you want to move in with him?"

Steve falls silent.

"Steve..." Jonathan flicks on his kitchen light and makes his way to his fridge. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again... fear is the dumbest reason on earth to not do something. And fear is also the dumbest thing on earth to *do* something that you don't want to do. You're afraid to move in with him, and you're afraid not to. You're afraid of yourself more than anything."

Jonathan takes a deep breath, takes a bottle of water out of the fridge, and continues.

"If you feel it, it's the truth. Feelings, emotions, instincts... they aren't arbitrary. You don't just make them up. You may think they don't make sense or that they're wrong, but they aren't. They come from somewhere inside of you, from your experiences and yourself, so even if nobody else in the world feels or thinks like you or agrees with you in anyway, that doesn't make your feelings any less true."

Steve mulls this over.

"I feel... I not ready. I wanted to be, Jonathan... I wanted it so badly. But I... I need to be sure."

"Then he can wait," Jonathan takes a swig of water and grins a little to himself. "And if he doesn't wait, I'll send Nancy over with a baseball bat and she'll beat him up for you."

Steve snorts. "Thanks, man. Not coming over yourself?"

"I think we both know I don't do violence well. I'll drive... and help hide the body."

Steve smiles into the phone.

"I can't wait to meet her... Nancy. She sounds great."

"We'll go out for Chinese and tequila. It'll be just like old times."

Despite his phone call with Jonathan, Steve still feels like shit when he goes into work on Monday, and on Tuesday, and on Wednesday. In fact, he suspects he will feel like shit for a good long while.

Billy called after a few days of silence, but he'd sounded so distant, and he hadn't come over. They hadn't really talked about... Steve doesn't even know if they're still...

"Mr. Harrington?"

Steve blinks and forces himself to focus. Maxine and Lucas and Dustin are sitting in front of him, working on something for their science class. It's after school but apparently the study of magnets is too awesome to be contained during regular hours, and Steve agreed to let the three of them stay late and work on their joint project together under his supervision.

Why not? What else does Steve have to do? Nothing... nothing but go back to his apartment, alone, without the well-dressed, well-muscled, maybe well-intentioned man who had become a fixture in Steve's life without him realizing it.

My apartment may be a bit empty, Steve thinks, but it is still mine.

There is some comfort in that. If only it was enough to effectively erase all his self-doubt.

"What's up, sprouts?" Steve looks up from the papers he is (not really) grading, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

"Can we get something from the AV room?"

"Come right back. No wandering, please."

Dustin and Lucas slip out quickly, shoving each other as they do so. Maxine lingers, watching Steve.

"What is it, honey?" Steve asks, trying to keep his voice level.

"You and Billy..." Maxine trails off and Steve suddenly feels like an even more epic piece of shit.

What can he say? What possible assurance can he give her about any of this? She's probably in a better state to determine her brother's frame of mind than Steve, and he can't possibly put her any more in the middle of this than she already is.

This right here is why you don't date the family members of your students, the sensible part of his brain belatedly informs him.

"I'm sorry, Max," Steve says, for lack of anything better to say. "We're trying."

Max nods and follows the boys.

Billy is manipulating him. Steve knows this. He's not an idiot. Well... he can be, but he's smart about a few things. He knows Billy's M.O., and he flatters himself that he can at least learn from his past screw ups. When Billy had called Steve had tried to explain himself, again, had tried to justify his fears. Billy had cut him off, dismissed him - "Later, Steve..." - and started calmly reciting the barest, emptiest pleasantries. It had made Steve want to cry and scream in frustration because Billy deliberately *wasn't hearing him*... it was like talking to a wall, and he couldn't even fight back without sounding like a hysterical fool.

Steve doesn't know what's worse... that he knows Billy is manipulating him or that this knowledge isn't stopping Steve from crumbling.

He shouldn't answer the phone anymore. He...

The door to the classroom bangs open and Max races in, hair flying, eyes wide.

"Maxine," Steve stands. "No running in...!"

"Mr. Harrington, please! They're coming!"

"Who's coming? Maxine, what are you...?"

"The Demogorgons!"

A beat. Steve tries to absorb this and finds that he can't quite manage it. He fixes her with his best Teacher Look (™) and crosses his arms.

"Max..."

"Dustin and Lucas are in the AV room. I was going to find them when I walked past the front window and look..." Max runs over to the window and jabs her finger at something outside. "Look, please! I know them, they're here for me, they're going to take me, kidnap me!"

"Max!" Steve huffs. "Enough now."

"They are, I know it, Billy said..."

Oh, boy, he really doesn't want to know what Billy Hargrove says or thinks about anything.

"Max, why would anyone want to kidnap you?" Steve asks, irritated and on his last nerve.

"They're criminals! They're in competition with my step-dad and Billy!"

Somehow everything screeches to a halt for Steve with that last admission. He blinks at Max once... twice...

You know about the Hargroves, don't you?

You haven't heard?

Thugs...

Who knows, Harrington?

Shady deals and intimidation...

Steve goes cold inside. He doesn't feel a sense of realization, exactly, or any kind of world-breaking alarm. Shock would be a gift right about now.

No... what he is coping with is the feeling you get when you can't lie to yourself anymore. It's a sense of betrayal... betrayal by Billy but also by himself.

He doesn't have long to grieve.

"Mr. Harrington... look!"

Steve turns finally and looks out the window to where Max is pointing. Two men are walking, quickly and with purpose, through the open courtyard that separates the front and rear buildings of the school.

It's fine, Steve thinks desperately. *They're parents.*

One of the men's suits flaps open and Steve sees a gun.

"Oh God," he whispers.

They're coming in the building.

"Please Mr. Harrington," Max begs. "Please believe me!"

"I believe you." Steve's mouth is dry. "I believe you. Oh shit." Steve turns and looks around frantically. "We have to get you out of the building. They're inside, we have to get you out..."

"We don't know which exit they'll be at."

"Okay... just..." Steve goes to the door and pokes his head out. The hallway is mercifully empty...the rest of the kids have gone to the AV room on another floor. He motions to Max and the two of them leave the classroom and head towards the other exit.

"They came in the other side," Steve mutters, half to himself. "They knew which building we'd be in so... they're probably coming up here. If we just..."

Max's phone starts playing its ringtone loudly. Steve does not scream in surprise, but it's a close thing.

"It's Billy!"

"Max, wait..."

Max answers the phone and starts unloading on Billy loudly, much louder than Steve wants. They'll hear her, shit...

Steve snatches the phone up.

"Billy?"

"Steve?"

"Billy, you better call the police or get your ass here or do something because..." There's a bang down the hallway and around the corner, and it's all Steve can do to keep from dropping the phone and shrieking in fear and frustration. They're coming, they know they're in here, they're going to shoot him and take Max and do God only knows what to her...

The banging sound of the doors is echoed by Dustin, who walks through the other entrance at the opposite end of the hall, carrying a candy bar.

"Hey, Mr. H!"

Oh God. Steve can hear running footsteps, and Billy repeating his name over and over again on the cell as he clutches it in his hands, and Max's labored breathing as she panics.

He drops the phone in Max's hand and then shoves Max into the nearby supply closet. He slams the door shut on her shocked face before spinning on his heels and turning to Dustin.

"Dustin!"

“Yes, my lord?”

“What are you doing out of the cafeteria?” He scolds as loudly as he can while still sounding (somewhat) normal. He can hear the two men behind him turning the corner and he can see Dustin’s eyes widen in alarm and confusion as he spies them over his shoulder. He ignores them, focuses on Dustin, trying frantically to communicate with his eyes...

Please play along, Dustin, please, for once...

“Umm,” Dustin says after the longest, most agonizing pause Steve has ever witnessed. “I wanted a snack.”

Oh, thank fuck.

“There aren’t snacks in the cafeteria?” Steve asks, still trying to silently signal to the very bemused kid in front of him.

The men aren’t moving. They’re just standing there watching. Steve’s heart is in his throat.

“There aren’t Three Musketeers bars in the cafeteria,” Dustin replies, confusion leaking into his voice.

Steve affects a put-upon sigh. *Fake it, fuck... just fake it.* He can hear the men shuffling behind him. “And no hall pass. Back where you belong, Dustin. And if Lucas is wandering around too, please let him know that *no* student should be out without a hall pass.”

“Okay,” Dustin is terribly unsure about what’s going on, about what to do. He shifts from one foot to the other and then asks, “Um, where are the others?”

Steve nearly has a heart attack before he is struck by a sudden inspiration.

“I’m sure Miss Hargrove and the others are also in the cafeteria, where you and *all* the other after-school kids and all the school moderators should be.”

Steve turns slightly and pretends to finally notice the hit-men lurking

behind him. He fixes them with a look that he sincerely prays channels all the petty authority inside of him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, forcing his voice to be calmly disinterested. “If you want to pick up your kid early you have to go to the front office. There are about fifty kids in after-school care, so you’ll need to follow the procedure.”

He then turns back to Dustin. Turning around, exposing his back to those men and those guns is one of the hardest, most terrifying things he has ever had to do, but he does it, angling his body so that he is between them and Dustin. He is a poor shield, but it is the only thing he can think of. *The most important thing.*

However, Steve's 'accidental' announcement seems to settle it for the men. They’ve missed their window, gotten bad intel – if Maxine Hargrove is in after-school care, there’s no way they’re getting to her without plowing through more teachers and children then even the most hardened criminals could probably manage.

The two men start off down the hallway, then break into a run when the roar of a Camaro echoes outside.

Steve sinks to the ground and tries desperately to catch his breath.

Steve is dreaming. That has to be it. He’s in a fog, he’s not thinking, this isn’t happening. That’s the only explanation for why he let himself be manhandled into Billy’s car, why he sat in the backseat in shocked silence while Billy yelled and Max cried in the front, why he let Billy grip his arm firmly yet gently and pull him from the car once they had stopped, let him usher him into an elevator and lead him all the way up to Billy's penthouse suite.

Why he hasn't spoken, why he's barely blinked. Why he feels like crying but can't cry.

It's only when a very large bourbon is shoved into his hands and he is pushed unceremoniously down onto a leather sofa that he seems to

come back to himself.

Even then the first words out of his mouth are frighteningly off-point.

“I don’t like bourbon.”

Billy stops pacing and fixes him with a blank stare. After a long moment, he barks out a humorless laugh and shakes his head.

“I don’t care,” he says. “Drink it. All of it.”

Steve obeys without thinking, downing the drink in two gulps. He immediately regrets it, and then decides he wants another. He hands the glass to Billy.

“Where’s Max?” he asks.

That question makes Billy furrow his eyebrows. Steve must have been more out of it then he’d realized. Billy doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he refills Steve’s glass, pulls over a footstool, and sits in front of Steve. He wraps Steve’s fingers around the glass and then wraps his own fingers around Steve’s.

“Steve?”

“Yes, I’m here,” Steve says hollowly.

“Okay,” Billy fights the urge to chuckle. This is serious, he knows that. His skin is buzzing with the skin-on-skin contact and his heart is fluttering a bit at getting to be this close to the teacher after a terrible week of radio silence, but he is also well aware that Steve is shaken and scared.

Unacceptable. He feels a wave of protective anger and tries not to let it show.

“Okay,” he starts again. “You’re at my penthouse. You’re safe. Max is safe, she’s in her room...she has a room for when she stays with me. She told me what happened.”

“They had guns, Billy,” Steve’s voice cracks. “They had guns. They were in the school. What if they had...?”

“Stop, sweetheart. Stop. I know. I’m... I’m sorry that happened. It’s... it’s nothing to do with you and the kids.”

“Nothing to do with me?!” Steve’s interrupts, flaring up with a righteous anger that evaporates almost as quickly as it appears. “Oh fuck...” Steve’s hands feel like liquid, his whole body... Billy whisks the bourbon away and pulls Steve into a tight embrace.

Steve doesn’t remember starting to cry but his cheeks are wet and his breathing is ragged. He feels like he’s shaking apart, like a gentle breeze or a casual nudge would shatter him utterly, like the only things holding him together are the two arms and the thick torso currently wrapped around him.

“They were going to shoot us,” he wheezes into Billy’s shoulder. “I lied, I put Dustin in the middle of it, if they had realized Max was there they would have shot us... oh FUCK!”

“I know, baby, I know. I’ve got you. I know.”

“Max...” Steve tries to pull it together. “Max said they were after her. That they were... business competitors? That they were going to take her...”

“Steve,” Billy pulls away, cups Steve’s face firmly in his hands and forces him to make eye contact. Steve cuts him off, though, before he can fill his head with any more excuses and platitudes and straight-up lies.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” Steve’s voice goes up in pitch and volume – it very nearly turns into a shriek. “You fucker, were you ever going to tell me what you are?!”

“And what am I, Steve?” Billy huffs in frustration. “What do you think I am?”

There is a pause while Steve works up the will to say it out loud.

“A criminal,” he finally whispers. “Hopper... people tried to tell me. I told them you weren’t. I told them you couldn’t be...”

“Steve...”

“They were in the school, Billy!”

“Steve, listen to me. What happened to you today... that should never have happened. It will never happen to you again. You will never have to be afraid like that again. I swear it. I am going to keep you safe. Whatever it takes.”

“Stop.” Steve isn’t looking comforted – he’s looking more afraid now. “What are you saying? Don’t... whatever you’re thinking of doing...”

“They came after my family,” Billy growls. “They would have succeeded, too, if it wasn’t for you.” Billy’s gaze softens. “You were so great. You *saved* Max. I’ll never be able to repay you.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve says, suddenly desperate. “You don’t have to repay me, just... please, Billy. Don’t do... whatever it is you’re thinking of doing, you don’t have to do it. Please don’t kill anyone, don’t do anything stupid, please...”

Billy’s lips are on his before he can go any further. Steve doesn’t want a kiss... no, he does want it, he wants it so bad, so bad it hurts... but he wants to be kissed as Steve-from-yesterday, as Steve-from-a-few-hours-ago. He wants to be kissed by Billy-from-before.

“You can’t,” Steve begs, pulling away. “Please don’t...”

“The most important thing,” Billy says, his voice cracking, “...is *family*. You’re my family, Steve. You and Max. That’s it. You’re the only people in the whole miserable fucking world I give a damn about. I know you think it’s too soon, that we haven’t been together that long, but I don’t care. I know what I feel. I know. You’re my family. And I will burn down this entire fucking world to keep you safe. I don’t care.”

“You’re going to hurt...”

“I’m going to kill, Steve,” Billy corrects, his voice terrifyingly steady. “From now until the day I die, I will kill anyone who threatens you. I’ll do it and laugh.”

Steve is having a little trouble breathing. It might be the alcohol, or his meds, or shock. Either way he can’t articulate a response to Billy’s

flat admission.

Billy stands and starts pacing, his voice assuming an air of complete and unquestionable authority.

"There's a lot I can't tell you, but you need to trust me that whatever I do is going to be for the best. There's a lot of tension at the moment and until that dies down everyone is at risk. You'll have to move in here, now... you can stay with me or you can have the floor below if you want. You'll take the rest of the week off and stay here while I sort everything. Might be better to take longer, even."

"Billy..." Steve tries, horrified by what Billy is saying and how he is saying it.

"There's security all over the place, you'll be safe here. It's for the best, sweetheart, trust me. It's important that you be good for me, now. And then, when this all dies down a bit, we can start thinking about something more permanent..."

"No," the edges of Steve's vision are going dark.

"Don't fight me on this, please. It'll be alright, baby, you just need to do what I say and..."

"No!" Steve stands up so suddenly that Billy is forced to take a step back. "Stop telling me what to do! STOP! You're a fucking liar!"

"Steve," Billy's voice is somewhere between placating and warning. Like Steve is a child about to be punished.

"I'm going," Steve is shaking his head, moving towards the door. He stumbles a bit but he's moving fast. "Don't talk to me. Don't call. I'm going..."

Billy can feel rage bubbling up, his eyes focused on the space where Steve was sitting a moment before, a shocked, shocking fury taking over...

"Steve!" he barks.

He is suddenly, terribly prepared to do *whatever* it takes to...

"Billy!" Maxine is out of her room, standing in the hallway and looking at him with scared, confused eyes.

Billy turn to acknowledge his sister's voice for a second, only a second... a momentary distraction, the full weight of Max, of his dad, of his responsibilities, of himself hitting him like a brick, slowing him down... and when he turns back, Steve is gone.

Steve doesn't stop running for at least four blocks, not until he's sure Billy isn't following him. He saw the guards on his way out of the building... how has he never noticed them before?... but they don't stop him, thank God. He finds the number 12 bus to take home.

Home, home, home, a chant in his ear.

At his stop he spills out onto the sidewalk blindly and digs out his keys, lets himself into his building. He walks up the stairs to his apartment in a daze.

They are waiting for him when he arrives.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, thanks for checking in... I'm still a dumpster fire!!! Kudos and comment always much loved and appreciated!

5. Here I am

Summary for the Chapter:

Guysss... I'm a jerk, I know it, why do you put up with me? Anyway, here's the gripping conclusion...

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter warnings for violence and homophobic language

They are waiting for Steve when he gets to his apartment.

He opens his front door and there they are... strange shadows moving around his *home*.

The lights are off. He doesn't see them clearly, but he feels it in his face and his gut when they land their first punches and kicks. He hits the ground, stunned, and then is jerked up to his knees. One of them shoves something in his mouth and he can taste metal... a gun.

This is how he dies.

They're threatening him, or they want something... Steve's brain chooses that moment to shut down and block everything out. Maybe it's for the best. It's for the best because nothing they say really matters. Nothing...not the who's or where's or why's.

None of that is going to save him now.

The gun is removed. The moment it leaves his mouth he reacts. He falls back and kicks out. The gun goes off and the bullet misses his ear by inches.

He's already moving. He reaches the couch.

His baseball bat is under the couch.

He's kept it there ever since he got mugged at his old place, the one he shared with Joey. He hadn't been able to sleep for weeks

afterwards, not until he got his bat and stowed it where he knew he could always reach it.

A bat with special modifications... a couple of thick, sharp nails hammered through it.

Not even Billy knows it's there.

It's dark, he can't see, and his ears are ringing from the gunshot. He's bleeding and hurting, and his soul is on fire with blind rage and panic. His fingers find the bat and wrap themselves around the handle.

He's on his feet in a moment. Without thinking, he swings and connects with something.

The shock of impact runs up his arm.

He hears a yowl, dim and distant in his ears.

He swings again and again.

Another gunshot, and he falls to the ground.

Billy is only two minutes behind Steve, miraculously. He breaks about twenty separate traffic laws trying to beat Steve's bus back to his apartment and pulls up on the other side of the road just as the front door of the laundromat swings shut behind Steve.

He loses more precious seconds trying to cross the street, nearly getting wiped out by a truck for his trouble. He reaches the door, finally, and thanks God that the lock is always broken and he can get in without any trouble.

He regrets that thought almost instantly, because he's not the only one who's managed to break in.

There's a banging noise coming from the apartment... Billy hears it

when he reaches the dim stairwell and races towards it, only to be stopped almost instantly by a thug in a ski mask running down in the opposite direction.

The man raises his gun but Billy is too quick... it's out of his hands and skittering across the floor before it can go off.

The man swings, his fist connects. Billy barely flinches, is back up in a moment, laughing, hitting back.

There's a joyful rage bubbling up inside of him as he embraces the simplicity of violence.

The two of them exchange several blows before Billy's opponent pulls a knife and lashes out, going wide. Billy jumps back, and the blade knicks him, a long thin line of red across his abdomen.

Not a bad wound, not deep. Shirt's ruined, though.

Billy kicks out and catches the man in the arm, forcing them both to separate slightly. Another hit, and another. He grabs the knife and twists the stranger's wrist, wrecking muscle and bone and forcing the weapon down before wrenching it away and pushing the man back.

"COME ON!" Billy roars, blood in his mouth, on his teeth.

The man yanks himself out of Billy's grip and dives forward.

Billy latches onto his throat and doesn't let go. Not until his opponent is dead.

He drops the limp body on the floor.

A gun goes off upstairs.

The sound is sharp, loud, unmistakable.

The world goes still.

Too late.

Too late...

A few moments later a second man is coming down the stairs. He slows down when faced with the carnage, surprise and fear in his movements. This is good – it throws him off balance. Leaves him vulnerable. Billy uses this to his advantage.

Billy needs this one alive.

It is the work of a moment and then there is nothing left but to climb the stairs to Steve's apartment. For a brief half-second Billy wonders if he is delaying, lingering out here in the stairwell. If he is afraid to go upstairs after that gunshot.

He needs to go.

He needs to hurry.

Steve could be...

He's at the door to Steve's apartment... it's ajar. The lights are switched off inside, but still Billy can see two lumps on the ground and one hunched down by the couch, silhouetted by the city lights outside the apartment windows.

The lump by the couch is shaking... even in the weak light Billy can see that, and it's making rough, low noises of distress that Billy recognizes even though they are so, so different from the pleasure-sounds he's come to love.

"Steve?" he says, begging the God he doesn't believe in...

The noises stop, and the apartment is filled with an agonizing silence as the hunched lump goes still.

"Billy?"

Billy leaps over the bodies (he assumes they're bodies... *fuck, what happened?*) and is across the room and wrapping up a shaking Steve in his arms in an instant.

"Steve... Steve," he says, voice low, trying to calm his emotions. It's all he seems to be able to say for a minute, Steve's name over and over, like saying it solidifies the other man somehow.

"Steve... You're okay," Billy finally manages after a moment. "You're okay. Are you okay?"

"S'too dark..." Steve mumbles.

"I'll get the lights... hold on, baby..."

"No," Steve grabs Billy's collar and makes him stay.

He swallows twice, shakes his head, and tries again to make himself understood. Billy waits, running his hands quickly yet carefully over Steve's body, checking for hurts and holes.

"It was too dark," Steve finally grinds out. "They couldn't see me. Too dark. I dropped when I heard the gunshot. They thought they got me, they didn't check, and they ran. Billy..." Steve manages to push through the shock and focus on the other man. "They thought I was dead. Fuck, Billy... you're hurt..."

"Who were they, Steve?" Billy asks. "What did they say?"

Steve shakes his head, presses his hand gently against the cut on Billy's chest. "I didn't... I heard your name. And my name. But I didn't... I didn't..."

"Shhh, okay, sweetheart," Billy pulls Steve close again. Steve lets out a small sob and buries his face in Billy's shoulder. "Don't worry, it's okay. I understand."

"Are they...?" Steve whispers and then stops. Billy holds him tightly as he tries to pull it together. Finally...

"Are they... dead?" Steve chokes out, a terrible shudder going through his body.

Billy is torn between the need to beat the life out of the unconscious attacker downstairs and comfort Steve.

“Billy...?”

Focus, Billy. Focus on Steve.

“It’s okay, sweetheart...” he murmurs again.

“Can you check?” Steve whimpers. “Did I... can you check?”

Yeah... Billy nods.

He probably should anyway. He very reluctantly releases Steve, propping him up slightly on the corner of the couch. He then goes over to the two men, flipping on a light before kneeling down next to them and pulling off their masks.

The first is alive but unconscious, bleeding heavily. The second one is dead, his skull cracked by the bat. Billy can see all this immediately. He starts to search for clues, for identification. He studies Steve's attackers carefully, trying to place them, tracking them back to the source...

“Did I... did I kill...?”

In the face of all this, Billy had almost forgotten he wasn't alone. The voice brings him back to the present... it is soft and quiet, like a child's voice... terrified.

Billy turns in time to see Steve's bruised, bloodied face crumble in horror and guilt. Unable to hold it together any longer, Steve lets out a keening, gasping, anguished sound and curls in upon himself.

“Did I kill someone, Billy?” he asks, begging Billy for... something. For a way to erase the last few hours. For any kind of comfort.

Steve sounds almost otherworldly in his grief.

Billy's gaze flicks from Steve to the week-old TV, still safe and untouched in its place, then back to Steve.

He thinks of all the useless gifts he's given his various lovers over the years. Of all the things in Steve's apartment that he's bought and paid for... to make Steve grateful... maybe even to make Steve love him.

To make himself feel worthy of this, of their relationship, of Steve's love.

All of them useless, worthless gifts in the end.

He makes his decision in the briefest of moments, and for the first time in his memory he find himself making a choice untainted by selfishness or doubt.

He places his fingers on the dead man's jugular and shakes his head.

"No, Steve. Baby, he's alive... there's a pulse..."

All the air rushes out of Steve in an instant and he sags in on himself, lets out a half-laugh, half-sob.

Billy goes over to him and pulls him, unresisting, into his arms.

"Shhh, baby... hush..." he murmurs gently, running his fingers through Steve's hair. "S'okay. You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't kill anyone. You're so brave, Steve. This was all self-defense. You did great... shhhh..."

"I thought..."

"I know. You're so good, Steve. S'okay, baby. Don't think about it. You didn't do anything."

Billy is dimly aware that he needs to get to work soon, but right now the future is a distant thing.

He murmurs soothing nonsense and holds Steve like the precious thing he is, the love he almost lost.

Steve holds him, too... he buries himself in Billy's shoulder, crying softly. Safe in Billy's arms.

After a few minutes, Steve calms himself and Billy checks him over for injuries. His face is battered and there's some strain when he breathes... might be a cracked rib.

"You need to get to the hospital."

“We need to call the police.”

Both statements pop out at the same time, and Billy is instantly shaking his head at Steve's foolishness.

“They’ll be on their way, Billy,” Steve insists when he sees the look on his boyfriend's face. “Someone will have heard the shots...”

“In this neighborhood?” Billy asks, cocking his head towards the window. It’s true, there are no sirens in the distance. Someone in the street yells, but it’s not a call for help.

Billy nods towards the men on the floor. “I recognize them. They’re from a gang known as the Demogorgons. They’ve been out for us for months. They’ll keep coming unless I stop them. I’m going to stop them. I’m going to end this now, follow it as far as it goes.”

"Why would they come here?"

"I don't know," Billy admits. "Maybe they thought I'd be here. Or they came for you. They know you're mine."

Billy has no idea how they could have found that out, though... he’s tried very hard to keep Steve hidden away. Steve shouldn't have been on anyone's radar, unless...

"That dumb name," Steve murmurs, making the connection. "The Demogorgons... they’re the same people who came for Max...?"

"They might have put it together afterwards that you hid her," Billy grimaces. That may be it, but... there’s something wrong here. "It doesn't matter. I'll take care of it, Steve. Please... I know you don't... but I will. I will take care of this."

He pours as much confidence as he can into his voice, trying to convince Steve and himself.

Steve looks exhausted. Too exhausted to do anything but murmur Billy's name, the one word loaded with all of today’s confusion and anxiety and disappointment.

“Billy...”

“Can you drive?”

“What?” Steve looks up and shakes his head. “Yeah, I...”

“I’m so sorry to make you do this...” Billy pulls out the keys to his Camaro and hands them to Steve, feeling a flash of anxiety that both of his babies are going to be out in the dark night without him. “You need to go to the hospital. You’re going to have to drive yourself... I’m so sorry. The hospital, then the penthouse. I’m going to stay here and take care of this... when you come back it’ll be like these guys were never here.”

Steve very much doubts that, but that isn’t the point right now.

“They’re still alive, Billy,” Steve reminds him, his voice edging on frantic again. “And two of them...”

“I got them, they’re downstairs, they didn’t get away.”

Steve isn’t sure if he’s happy to hear that or not. His gaze lands on the unmoving men and the blood leaking from their bodies onto his rug.

“My people are going to come... Steve...” Billy’s fingers find Steve’s chin and gently turn his head, bringing his focus back to the man in front of him. “It’s going to be taken care of. Please do this for me, baby. Please go.”

Steve’s chocolate brown eyes meet Billy’s steely blue ones and, in an instant, everything clicks into place.

Steve understands what Billy is saying... no... what Billy is asking.

Nothing Steve could say or do would probably affect the outcome of this, could change what was going to happen here in this apartment in the next few hours. If Steve tried to argue Billy would probably threaten, or coax, or railroad him, and eventually get his way and sweep the whole thing under the carpet anyway. Billy would not allow himself to be caught in anything that could really damage him.

As for damaging Steve... Billy is offering him an out. A kind of amnesia. Freedom. If Steve calls the cops, stays in the apartment...

maybe this was self-defense, but Steve also beat up two dangerous criminals with a nail-bat. Even if the cops didn't charge him with anything, someone else could still get to him...

Steve could still say something. Maybe he should say something. Do the 'right' thing.

But Billy's eyes are on his and they're asking him...

Is he making a deal with the devil here? Or is he accepting an act of love?

Billy is asking him...

Steve's breath catches in his chest and he curls his fingers around the keys. He gives Billy a small, slight nod, hesitates, and then places a gentle kiss on the corner of the criminal's mouth.

It feels like a kind of goodbye.

Billy is already on his phone by the time Steve is on the stairs.

He tears into the survivors of that horrible failed attack and he gets what he needs... confirmation of what he already knows.

He gets it and he goes with it. He doesn't think, doesn't stop, doesn't question the instinct that propels him forward, ever forward, once more into the breach, dear friends.

Buzz, buzz, buzz in the blood, and Billy hits Mike Flayer's office like a shark hits a seal and Flayer doesn't even see him coming until he's already lying stretched out on the ground. Together they make art, glorious art that's nothing like Steve's work...

Billy uses fine hair like a brush, swirls it in red paint, and then he tears it out of scalps and tosses pretty strands up in the air and watches them float down like little angels. He wants to hear the screams but it's too risky given the locale... it's fine, the gurgling

noise is plenty satisfying. It is enough. Gurgle, gurgle, blood coming up like a baby spitting up oatmeal. Choking on broken bits of teeth and torn pieces of tongue. But the widening holes in fragile bodies will bring death first.

Demogorgons and Flayers run in to stop him. Billy moves through building after building and they pour out of the rooms like so many rats. They might as well try to stop a hurricane.

He tears them all apart.

Billy know just what to do. Billy loves Steve's art, beautiful in its complexity, but he has to admit that there's something to be said for painting with only one color.

Just like that, the monster is born again and again in the blood of every fresh victim, of every doomed soldier caught in the crossfire.

He never cared like this before, not in all the back-alleys and bars and anonymous rooms of his past.

This is different.

Personal.

They came after Steve. Steve and Max.

He was calm before, but now the blood is swelling like the tide and it's threatening to cover his eyes and drown him.

The rage must go somewhere, the message must be left.

He grabs a guard, mid-thirties, brown hair and an uncorrected overbite, but such human attributes barely register as the red haze makes him a perfect target for Billy's anger, for his sub-human or above-human will.

He keeps this one alive. He needs to be able to talk.

Billy works fast. He makes the man useless as a human being in every possibly way until after a while his actions are bordering on redundant and he has to stop. No doubt this man had family, friends.

Not anymore - let's see them try to look at what's left of his face now. In five minutes his life has been utterly and irrevocably changed.

"Tell them," Billy says, leaning over his victim, close and intimate, his brain, hands, and voice all as jittery as a junkie before a hit. Only the core remains steady, like it always does.

"Tell them. I'm coming."

The man has one foot in the other world now. His mouth is still moving, though, and Billy leans down to listen.

As he lays dying, the stranger gives Billy a gift.

It's information. It's an accusation. It's a breadcrumb.

It's a seed of doubt.

Billy will follow it as far as it goes.

Steve is standing by the window in Billy's living room and looking out at the city below when Billy returns. It's very early in the morning... the sky is beginning to lighten with the first pinks and yellows of day. The colors dance across Steve's pale, bruised face. Even from here Billy can see the shadows under his eyes and knows that his love has gotten no sleep.

Billy has worked long and hard all through the night. He cleaned up in one of his safe houses before coming home, so the only evidence of what he's been up to is the flowering bruises on his knuckles and the crudely bandaged cut on his chest.

Amazing what soap and a clean shirt will do.

He can still taste blood in his mouth.

He closes the door gently behind him so as not to disturb Steve's contemplation.

Billy had tried the hospital first, but Steve had already checked himself out. Billy managed to wheedle the receptionist into letting him cover the cost of his lover's care. The receipt is a list of hurts Billy burns into his memory as he drives back to his apartment – a slightly cracked rib, bruising on the torso and stomach, a black eye, partial hearing loss.

Steve is clearly bruised and worn out, but he still looks so handsome in his slacks and shirtsleeves, staring thoughtfully out at the dawn.

He still takes Billy's breath away.

Billy can see Steve staying here, in the penthouse, in this private world far above the hustle and bustle below. He can see himself keeping Steve here, just like he said he would. The image in his mind is so strong, so powerful. Steve has to see, now, that it's better this way. Billy would support him, Billy could...

Billy's mind buzzes with horrors and questions and a terrible secret... a new knowledge that changes everything.

He swallows hard and pushes it all down.

He shrugs off his jacket and moves towards Steve, comes up behind him and wraps his arms around him.

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" he asks gently.

"Are you alright?" Steve croaks back, concern etched in every note of his voice.

Billy hums into Steve's shoulder. "You look so beautiful standing here. My princess in the tower."

Steve turns and their lips meet. Billy laps into Steve's mouth, inhales him like oxygen while Steve's hands come up and stroke his face, his neck, drift down and up again over his sides.

Checking that he's okay. Confirming that he's still there.

"You're not hurt?" Steve asks, a desperate edge to his voice. "They aren't... coming for you?"

"No, pretty boy, no," Billy murmurs against his mouth, his hands roving in their own exploration. "No, sweetheart. I took care of it. Fuck, only you would be worried for me after you just had your teeth kicked in."

Steve studies him for a minute and then smacks him hard on the arm.

"Asshole," he snaps.

"Steve, come on," Billy is too tired for this. He just wants to tuck Steve away and hold him close, but he has a terrible feeling that's not going to happen.

"I'm not your princess in a tower," Steve says angrily. "I'm not a child or an idiot. Just because you got me out of a mess doesn't mean you aren't responsible for putting me in the mess in the first place! I'm still pissed."

"Are you?"

"I am. Billy...what have you done?"

"I took care of it."

"What does that mean?"

"Are you sure you want to know, Steve?" Billy's eyes narrow and his lip curls up in a nasty smirk. He can't help himself. "You were crying earlier because you... you thought you killed someone."

"That's different!" Steve yells, and then falls suddenly, horribly silent.

Of course... there's Billy's answer. Steve knows what Billy has done. Of course he knows. He's known all along in his heart of hearts, and the betrayal on his face is not because of Billy, not really. Steve hates himself now more than he could ever hate Billy. He hates his blindness and confusion and naivety.

He hates that he doesn't know his own soul.

"The doctors at the E.R. asked what happened. A cop came in..." Steve trails off, sighing and rubbing his hand through his hair.

“Yeah?” Billy cocks his head, on edge again.

“I told them I fell. Stupid... doesn't even make sense as a lie. They didn't believe me, of course. They asked if my partner had hurt me. The more I lied the worse the questions got. They wanted me to stay overnight, but I had to leave, I had to...”

“What did you tell them?” Billy is suddenly cursing himself for paying for the hospital bill in his own name. That could cause him trouble later if the cops are involved.

“Nothing... how could I tell them anything?” Steve lets out an ugly laugh. “I don't know anything. I don't really know you at all.”

“I'm your boyfriend, Steven,” Billy reminds him, irritated.

Steve takes a step back, shaking his head and running his hand through his hair again. Billy doesn't miss the wince when the motion irritates Steve's side and his cracked rib.

“Why did you ask me to move in with you?” Steve's voice shakes slightly. “Is it because of this?”

“No! Not... not exactly. It's dangerous... my work is dangerous, baby...”

“Yeah, and here my biggest fear was that we were moving too fast in our *relationship*,” Steve spits out the last word like it's poison.

“I couldn't tell you about all this, Steve,” Billy says. It's the truth and it's so obvious and inadequate. “What do you want me to say...? I was going to try to ease you into it.”

“Well, I'm in the deep end of the pool now, babe,” Steve snaps. His sarcastic use of the endearment hurts Billy more than he expects. “If there was a middle ground somewhere I think we missed it. Sorry if I can't just turn this off...”

“I hate it,” Billy interrupts abruptly.

Steve's mouth drops open and then snaps shut again.

"I hate that I don't..." Billy searches for the words. "I hate that I can't fix this for you. That I can't be better. I don't... feel things right. Things that should disgust me just... don't, anymore. I didn't feel anything before you. Not for a long time. I don't know why, but the first time I really saw you everything changed."

Silence fills the apartment as Steve tries to absorb this. He shakes his head after a moment.

"I don't believe in love at first sight," Steve insists.

"Yeah you do," Billy chuckles weakly. "You're a romantic."

"Maybe," Steve says. He glances down at his shoes. "Maybe I am... but I've done this before. I've trusted people before and I can't... I've misjudged people before. I've misjudged you. And I'm not okay with this. With what you do. With what I suspect this does to you... does to you inside."

Billy can't argue about that. He can't because he knows it's true...this kind of life wears you down. It unmakes and remakes you, again and again. The vibrant, violent, hungry parts of Billy that Steve loves also have that darker edge, those terrible consequences.

"There's something in you I never saw, Billy. And it's as much a part of you as everything else. When does this life destroy you?" Steve asks. "Do you know when enough is enough? Do *I* know when enough is enough?"

Billy doesn't have an answer to that. After 'the incident', after he lost his mom, lost his dreams, lost his morals, lost himself, he'd always operated on the assumption that there was no such thing as 'enough'.

And then, out of nowhere, he was alive again.

He met Steve and he was alive again.

"I've..." Billy swallows.

He's never been one for regrets, but he wishes now, in this moment, that things could be different for them... that he and Steve could have met as boring, middle-class teenagers in Kansas or Indiana, could

have gone to school and gotten shitty, boring jobs and lived together in peace, without all of these... complications.

He also knows he need to take the world as it is. He has always been brutally pragmatic in that way.

"I've got more to do Steve," he says quietly but firmly. "I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. To keep us all alive and safe. The fallout... that has to come later. If it comes at all."

The two men stand in silence for a long time, not looking at each other, each lost in their own thoughts. Each burdened with a terrible knowledge, now, and each trying to figure out what they can and cannot live with.

"I need to go, Steve," Billy says finally, breaking the silence. "There's something I need to speak to my father about."

"Your father..." Steve trails off. Of course, Billy's father has taken on a new dimension now. Steve is going to have to figure that tangled web out, too, if he decides to...

"I need time," Steve says. It feels like an echo of their earlier fight, but things are so different now. Steve sees the whole picture now.

Billy doesn't argue. He trusts Steve to keep quiet, no matter what he decides. Even if he didn't, it doesn't matter so much. If he can't have all of Steve then just having Steve's silence doesn't really mean anything.

Steve allows Billy to walk him to his bus stop and wordlessly accepts his suggestion that he go to the diner and get breakfast before returning to his apartment. Best give Billy's crew another few hours to clean up.

As he walks away Billy has the strangest feeling that he is never going to see the teacher again.

Billy has one last stop to make before he can rest.

A dying man has told him something. Another dying man confirmed it. This 'something' needs clearing up.

Neil Hargrove is alone in his office when Billy gets there. He looks up from where he is sitting at his desk and raises an eyebrow.

All the things Billy had planned to say, the sly way he was going to bring the topic up... it all vanishes from his mind the moment the door clicks shut behind him.

He hears the click and the blood-soaked Billy is gone. Only the frightened child remains.

A terrible monster waits in front of him.

"You gave him up," Billy says, standing stunned and miserable in the middle of the room, trying not to drown as waves of emotion wash over him.

His voice sounds strange, strained, but Neil doesn't give any indication that he's noticed. Instead, he leans back in his chair and fixes a steady gaze on Billy.

"Who, son?" Neil asks. He sounds like he's a 1950s TV dad sitting in his armchair with a pipe in his hand, waiting for Billy to tell him all about his Little League game.

"Harrington..." Billy chokes out. "My... Maxine's teacher."

"It's alright, Billy," Neil says calmly. "You can say what he is."

Billy finds, to his horror, that he can't.

"Your lover," Neil supplies coolly when Billy doesn't answer. "Your boyfriend. Your cock-sucking little whore. That faggot art teacher at Maxine's school, the one you've been fucking. Did you think I didn't know? Do you really think anything goes on in this city... that anything goes on with my children... without me knowing about it?"

No... they'd been careful. *Not a secret...but discrete.* He'd tried so hard

to protect Steve, tried so hard to save him from...

“He saved Max,” Billy chokes out. “He saved her from the Flayers and the Demogorgons and you told them where he was. You told them he was to blame.”

“They would have found him eventually,” Neil shrugs as if it is no concern of his. “I did let them know once I found out... indirectly, of course. No one attacks us and gets away with it, and the situation called for a calculated escalation. They wanted someone to pay for their failed scheme, a soft target to hit, and they were under the impression that Steve Harrington was *special*. Important to someone.”

So, you kill two birds with one stone, Billy thinks desperately. The Flayers are temporarily satisfied, and Steve is dead. And then I go off the wall and kill everyone because I can never hold my temper. Maybe I even fall back into my old spiral and self-destruct. You destroy your enemies and Steve and me. All that death and you come out clean. As always.

“It’s always the same with you, Billy,” Neil shakes his head and stands up, moving around the desk. “You ruin everything you touch. I don’t give a fuck what you do in your spare time – I’ve long since given up on you, so if you fuck some pretty little teacher it’s no concern of mine. But you paraded him around, Billy. You were going to *move in together*. Yes, don’t think I don’t know about that.”

“You’re full of shit, dad,” Billy murmurs in disbelief. “Steve saved Max’s life. He’s been there for her, and for me. He’s been like family...”

“Family!” Neil snaps and it’s all Billy can do not to step back. His father’s fingers find his throat and give it a dangerous squeeze. “Family is what I say it is, boy. Be careful you don’t find yourself outside of this one.”

Billy feels it again, that terrible rush of fear, and it’s remarkable because for once it isn’t so terrible – it’s a shadow of what it used to be.

The blood and the death, the image of Steve sitting in the floor of his apartment, his face illuminated by a broken lamp, crumbling in grief

when he'd realized what he'd done...

Neil is still there, still awful, still the monster that haunts Billy's nightmares... but he's not what Billy sees.

Billy isn't afraid of Neil right now... he's disgusted. Repulsed.

"I don't want to lose you, son," Neil's voice breaks through the haze.

It's 'son' again, suddenly, and the word makes Billy feel sick. The thought that Neil's blood runs through his veins makes him want to vomit.

"You have the loyalty of a few of my best men and getting rid of you at this point would be... inconvenient." Neil gives a slight shrug, as though all the death, Billy's feelings, everything that has happened is boring to him. "At the end of the day, you're still my boy."

Neil releases Billy and steps away, back to his desk, his back to his son.

In the brief silence Billy can hear the tick of his watch.

"He's alive, dad," Billy says.

He'd almost think Neil hadn't heard him if it wasn't for the minute tension in his shoulders, the way his arm shifts. If he hadn't learned to read his father's moods over the years.

If he wasn't Neil Hargrove's son.

"He's alive," Billy repeats. "They came at him with four of their best. My faggot art teacher bashed their skulls in and lived. Barely a scratch on him."

Billy doesn't say anything else.

He turns around and walks out the door. He leaves.

He leaves Neil standing there, staring fixedly at nothing.

He leaves the most important part of his message unsaid.

They both know it, though. Neil and Billy are both men of violence, and there is an unspoken language for their kind. It is a language of instability and transformations and doubts. It is the language of the slave standing behind the conquering emperor, whispering that all men die.

It's only a matter of time now. Neil can try to bring the day of reckoning forward – he can go after Billy or Steve and kick-start the end. Or maybe Billy will do it. Maybe one day Billy's ambitions will outstrip his patience.

It hardly matters.

The end will come and only one of them will be left standing.

It's only a matter of time.

Notes for the Chapter:

Kudos and comments always appreciated!

6. Like a hurricane

Summary for the Chapter:

The boys work it out

Notes for the Chapter:

The feels and the smut! All the kinky smut! Hooray!

They send each other texts.

Steve lets Billy know that his apartment is now spotless and that the locks have been changed. Billy replies almost immediately but doesn't ask for a key.

Billy shoots off short messages at least once a day. They are tentative, nothing like his former demands, his attempts to control and dominate.

He knows that way won't work now, would only drive Steve away.

Maybe he feels he no longer has the right.

He asks, if it's not overstepping, that Steve lets him know when he gets home from work. That he's safe. If there's anything or anyone bothering him.

Steve obliges, but he limits himself to short messages. He sets boundaries and sticks to them, for both their sakes.

Still, he can't help calling out for Billy when he wakes up in the night, drenched in sweat, visions of bloody violence behind his eyes. He texts and makes Billy tell him that he is okay, that Max is okay. Billy always responds (always, at any time, no matter how late or how early) and when he does Steve lays back on his bed and cries a little, aching for Billy to wrap him up tightly in his arms and hold him. Needing to see Billy gazing at him like he's the only thing that matters.

Billy does the same thing when he has bad dreams. He texts, and

Steve answers (always, at any time, no matter how late or how early).

They never actually speak to each other.

One week turns into two.

They both realize, separately, on day ten, that they never actually said the words 'I love you' to each other.

"Take a seat, Tommy... I want to talk a few things over with you." Billy leans back in his chair behind his huge, sturdy, neatly organized desk and tries not to feel the absence of the person who once knelt behind it.

Tommy, who has only recently recovered from his visit to the Upside Down Nightclub and his own battle with the Demogorons, obeys. He's still a bit battered and bruised, but he's looking at Billy with an open, if somewhat wary expression. Billy gives him a slight nod and wonders, not for the first or the last time, if he is making the right decision.

"There are some things changing on the organization, Tommy. Ride or die things. Was wondering if you might be interested in a promotion..."

Tommy's eyes widen.

"Where'd the shiner come from, Harrington?"

Steve swallows and spares a shift glance over to Principal Hopper before returning his attention to lunchroom duty.

"Would you believe me if I said it was a bar fight?"

"No, Harrington, I wouldn't."

There are many things Steve wants to say, but none of them would help. Still, he feels a spiky feeling of determination travel up his spine. He's hyper-aware of his own potential these days, of his own power. He's seen a dark underworld and it scared the hell out of him, but nothing has been more unsettling than discovering his own capacity for violence.

Steve gives Hopper a noncommittal hum before shouting at Lucas Sinclair to stop running in the cafeteria.

"... I understand it's a big ask, but I need you to keep an eye on him. 24/7 protection. Find somebody trustworthy... and discrete."

"I'll take some shifts, and Sal can take the rest." Tommy's brow furrows as he considers the situation. "You think the Demogorgons still want him?"

"Them... my dad... doesn't matter. Harrington doesn't need help finding trouble."

"You're not dating anymore?"

Billy gives Tommy a sharp sideways glance but there is none of the derision he expects (fears) on his new lieutenant's face. There is only curiosity and concern, and when Tommy reads Billy's look as a rebuke he shrugs sheepishly.

"Met him a few times in passing. Harrington, I mean. Knew you were seeing him. Lots of the guys did, actually. He seems like a nice guy. Tough, too, to survive a hit by the Demogorgons. That's good." Tommy tilts his head a little. "Maybe he's not as fragile as you think."

There is too much in that statement for Billy to process at the moment. Maybe later, when he feels less like he's been gutted. Still, enough sentiment gets through that it's no wonder his voice goes a little rough.

"He's under my protection until I say otherwise."

Tommy takes that to mean that the matter is closed and wisely drops it.

Steve can feel himself changing. He can feel the world redefining itself and it terrifies him.

"Nothing's what I thought it was. I'm not who I thought I was. Jonathan..."

Steve looks up into the sleepy eyes of his friend, sitting across the table from him with his face crinkled up in concern.

"What am I going to do?"

Jonathan's long fingers pick at the label on his beer bottle. After a long moment he shakes his head.

"You are who you always were. And you're gonna have to decide what you can live with."

Despite his new mission, the looming threat of a civil war within the organization, the pressures imposed upon him... despite all of this, Billy finds himself strangely untethered as days drift past.

It feels worryingly similar to the days before 'the incident'.

His certainty is gone, if it was ever there in the first place. He's genuinely starting to wonder if he ever really had it.

The urge to return to his father's side and accept that he's a failure and give up these silly daydreams of a future and a life of his own is profound and terrible. If he just puts his head on the block this can all end, and he's tempted... oh God, is he tempted to just end it...

Billy feels himself slipping into darkness.

His mind is dwelling on his deadline as he takes the elevator up to the penthouse.

He set the deadline for himself that morning he confronted his father. He set it to keep himself honest.

Nobody else knows about it, not even Tommy.

He has learned a little from his father at least - he's learned to keep some things secret. To keep his powder dry, as it were.

Right now the deadline looming in the back of his mind is the only thing keeping him from becoming completely unmoored.

He feels small, inadequate, wildly incapable of doing what he knows he is going to have to do.

He wishes...

He wants...

But I never really get what I want, he thinks as he steps off the elevator.

Not really.

He lets himself into his apartment and everything slams to a halt as Billy looks up, shocked.

Steve is here.

He's here, leaning against the big glass window, waiting for Billy to come in.

Billy takes off his jacket and doesn't move towards Steve for a long moment.

Tommy must have let him in... but why is he here?

Steve doesn't say anything, just watches him... his face is watchful-wary and Billy can't tell what's going on inside his head. After a moment Billy takes a few steps towards him, tentatively, like one

would approach a spooked horse.

He stops a few feet away and pauses.

"I'm sorry," he says after a beat.

He's not even sure what he's sorry for. For everything, maybe.

All he knows is that he's wanted to apologize for weeks. Now the words are out, and they hang between the two men, floating heavy in the air.

Steve doesn't answer right away, but when he does his voice is a clear, sweet bell sound that warms Billy from the inside out.

"I'm sorry, too. I wish..." he trails off.

"I know," Billy says, and he does know.

"I've been wondering how this could work," Steve says. His brow furrows in that thoughtful way Billy loves. "I want you. I know that you are who you are, and I am who I am. I don't want either of us to change."

"I'd change," Billy says. A thread of certainty, like a piano wire, deceptively strong, winds its way through him. "I would for you."

"I wouldn't want you to do it for me. Only for yourself. If that's what you want."

Billy considers this.

Billy can't tell Steve everything, all the plans he has in the works that will ensure that his enemies are dead and his loved ones are safe... but then again, maybe Steve isn't asking him to.

Maybe he just needs to be as honest as he can be.

"Very few people leave organizations like my dad's alive," Billy admits. "One way or another. And I'm his right-hand man... I've picked up quite a few bad habits along the way and after everything that's happened there's no way those habits aren't going to be put to

use. I could run, or I could take control, or I could keep going the way I'm going.

"There's..." the admission sticks in his throat but he forces it out all the same. "There's no clean way out for me. But I'm going to do what I need to do to stay alive and to protect those I care about. Always."

Steve looks at him for a long time.

After what feels like an eternity, he nods.

"I guess..." he says, half-wonderingly. "I guess I don't mind as much as I thought I would."

"You're not afraid?" Billy asks. He realizes when he does so that this idea has been weighing on him ever since Steve walked out on him. Billy knows blood and death, and when the red mist descends he goes to another place. Steve should be afraid. Billy is afraid sometimes... and afraid of himself most of all.

He is the brat prince, the master criminal, the psycho killer... but he never wanted Steve to be afraid of him.

Steve looks at him, his deep brown eyes fixed on his.

"No, Billy," he says. "I'm not afraid."

"No?" Billy has to shove his hands in his pockets to hide his trembling.

Steve shakes his head and continues to speak, slowly and carefully, as if weighing the ideas out.

"It kind of occurred to me, though, that you might not feel safe," he says. "Safe with me, I mean. Not... not that I might kill you, but that I might hurt you some other way. If you couldn't trust me with your secrets, then there had to be good reason for that, right?"

Billy moves to speak but Steve shakes his head and reassures him, rushing ahead.

"It's okay. I'm not blaming you. It's a hard thing for me to face but I

need to acknowledge it. I'm not the only one who needs to be cared for. You have things you need, too. We both have things we need. I'm sorry if I ever... let you down in that way."

Billy swallows and shakes his head. "That's not on you, sweetheart. And you didn't. You could never let me down."

Steve rubs his hand across his chest nervously. "And now?"

And now.

"I want you to come back to me, sweetheart," Billy says, quietly. "But only if you want it."

Steve gives him a small smile. "I had a chat with Jonathan, you know?"

"I feel like I should be jealous of that guy," Billy sighs. "But he helped you, so I can't quite hate him. What did he say?"

"Oh, he gave me a lot of stuff about Nietzsche and Sartre and 'morality is a social construct' and 'we're all part of the abyss'. We got off topic and started talking about absurdism."

"I'll be honest, I'm not sure where that leaves us."

"No, it wasn't a really helpful chat. But I *think* what it boils down to is that I want to be with you. When everything happened...when those men tried to take Max, when they tried to kill me... I think I was more upset that I cared so much about you. I cared more about you then I did about the law and morality and right and wrong... all those things I thought defined me. I realized they weren't as important to me as protecting what I have... had... have. I wanted to live, and be with you, and nothing else mattered that night. The Billy I'm with is beautiful and kind and sweet and protective. I can handle pretty much anything else if I get to be with you, and love you, and take care of you."

Billy feels a sense of peace and elation wash over him. His shoulders slump in relief and he moves towards Steve to embrace him.

"But..."

Billy stops.

"I'm here to be with you, Billy. I'm not here to save you. I can't do that. It's not a matter of 'should' or 'want'... it's just that it's something only you can do. If you even need saving...which again is a question only you can answer."

Steve takes a deep breath and then let's it out again.

"I'm not an object, and I'm not a princess to be protected. I'm not all sweetness and goodness. I'm going to make mistakes, so don't put me on a pedestal. And I'm going to live my life on my terms, so don't force me... don't ever force me into something I don't want. I'm trusting you now, Billy. I'm trusting you. If you lie to me, if you get anyone I care about hurt, if you lose your moral compass and can't find your way back, if you stop seeing me as *me*... you won't get another chance."

Billy swallows.

He wonders for a brief moment if he can do this.

He can.

If Steve can do this for him, then he can do this for Steve.

"I understand," he says after a beat. "I swear, Steve."

Silence fills the space between them.

"And..." Steve chews on his lip, suddenly at a loss for the right words. "I just... if it ever comes down to a choice... a choice between..."

"Stop," Billy interrupts. "I need to say this to you. One time, and then I don't want you to doubt it or question it again."

Steve stops and listens, his eyes glued to Billy's face.

"I choose you," Billy says. "If it comes to that, if it becomes impossible, if something happens... whatever happens. I choose you. Not my dad, not the rest of it. You. You are my partner. My lover."

You are the only one I've ever felt this way about. If I die tomorrow or if I live to be a hundred, it's you. I choose you. It's always been you."

In the stillness of the apartment both men experience a strange release. A steely feeling of love fills them, and silent promises are made.

"Good," Steve gives a short nod, his voice cracking slightly. "I guess... just one thing left to do, then..."

He shifts his position and Billy steps forward and thinks *now* they'll hug, and kiss, and fuck themselves into oblivion and everything will be great again...

"Kneel," Steve says.

Billy is drawn up short. He stops, blinks at Steve, trying to read him. Maybe he misheard...?

"Billy..." Steve says in a little sing-song voice. His mouth quirks up. "Kneel."

Billy glares warily, trying grasp the rules of this new game.

"Big tough guy, huh?" Steve murmurs coolly. He wraps his long fingers around Billy tie and gives it a little jerk, drawing him in. Billy can feel the thin cloth tighten like a leash. "I know what you did for me. What you'd do for me. My scary attack dog. You want to bite me, Billy?"

Billy can feel something like a growl rise in his throat – he's not sure if he likes this or not. Billy is not a dog. He kneels for no man. Nobody tells him what to do.

On the other hand, Steve is looking at him with that cool fire in his eyes. His sweet, pretty teacher is gone and in his place is a strong, fierce, beautiful man who takes no shit from anyone, Billy included. This is the man with the nail bat under his couch, the man who dealt out death and pain and *saw* the blood and still came back home to Billy. There's power in Steve, strange and magnificent, and it sends a low thrum through Billy's core to see it.

He wants to obey... he's never wanted that before, but he wants it now.

Steve watches Billy's face as he processes these thoughts, these strange desires. After a moment, he seems to read his answer and his lips quirk up in a smirk.

"I don't think you want to bite me, Billy. I don't think that's what you want to do with your mouth."

Fingers twist around his tie and Billy can't hide his sharp intake of breath.

"Kneel down, Billy."

Billy kneels.

Steve's back is pressed against the window glass, supporting them both as Billy kneels and pushes against him. Billy takes a deep breath and presses his face against Steve's clothed crotch, lets himself close his eyes and bury himself in the musky dark, away from the world and the blood and the shit and all he is and all he is expected to be.

There's safety in this position, prostrate at Steve's feet. Comfort.

Steve's clever fingers are in his hair now, gently brushing his curls, stroking and soothing.

"My good boy," he hears Steve murmur. "I've got you, baby. I'm home now. I'm gonna take care of you. All that bullshit out there, all that cruelty and violence. Forget about it. All of it. You're mine, just mine, my baby, my sweetheart. I've got you."

Billy realizes that wants to forget, and he finds that as Steve's words wash over him something inside of him eases.

He can do this. He can be good. He doesn't need to fight. There's no threat beating down the gates anymore.

He's burned it all down and he'll do it again, but he doesn't have to do any of that shit right now.

There's nothing now but pleasing Steve, and he knows how to do that.

He can please Steve.

Billy flicks the top button of Steve's pants open and then pulls his zipper the rest of the way down with his teeth. The hitch in Steve's breath is the first sign Billy gets that he is not unaffected by all of this, and it thrills him. Steve's fingers don't falter, though, and they continue to hold and stroke Billy's hair as he pushes down Steve's pants and his boxers. He's already half-hard, his pretty cock so close to Billy's face.

Steve's fingers tighten, just this side of painful, and Billy's eyes snap up to where Steve is staring him down. That in-control look is back, and fuck if it doesn't do things to Billy, doesn't feel like sweet surrender when he doesn't fight and doesn't resist, when he looks up for instruction, eager to submit.

"You're going to blow me, Billy," Steve says calmly. It's not quite his 'teacher' voice, but it's still weighted with authority. The voice says that Billy doesn't have to make choices, he doesn't have to do anything but what Steve wants. The voice means that he can let go of his tightly-held control.

"You're going to blow me, you're going to worship me with your mouth, and then I'm going to cum down your throat. You're going to swallow all of it. Understand?"

He could stop this, they both know it, Steve is giving him an out, but Billy doesn't want it.

"Understand?"

Billy nods. "Yes, Steve." He says 'Steve' but it sounds like 'sir' and 'master' and 'daddy' and 'love' all wrapped into one.

"Go on."

Billy contemplates his strategy for only a moment before wrapping his lips around Steve's cockhead and sucking. Steve lets out a low moan of pleasure that goes straight up Billy's spine.

He works his mouth back and forth down Steve's shaft, wetting it and relaxing his throat so he can take more and more until his nose is nearly brushing the hairs at the base. He deepthroats Steve, using his tongue to press against the underside of his cock. His fingers drift up and caress Steve's balls.

Billy does as he's told. He worships Steve's cock with his mouth, sucking hard and then drawing off a bit, taking him deep, working the shaft at a steady pace. He tastes precum and can't fight down a low moan at the taste, the vibrations in his throat inspiring an answering noise in Steve.

The longer he's on his knees this way – at Steve's command, at the altar of Steve – the more aroused and keyed up he is. He pulls out every trick he knows, revels in pleasing Steve with the silky heat of his mouth and the skill of his tongue.

He wants so much, wants more, wants it all... and when Steve cums he swallows it all down.

Billy pants, throat wrecked, as Steve slumps down, spent. His jaw aches and he can taste Steve on his tongue and he's trying to moderate his breathing. He's achingly aroused just from having Steve's cock in his mouth, and he really wants release.

After a long moment Steve's voice breaks the pseudo-silence.

"Take your clothes off, Billy."

The minute Billy is together enough to process the command, he stands and obeys. He removes his shirt, his shoes and socks, his pants. He pauses at his underwear to steal a glance up at Steve who, to Billy's great consternation, is still fully clothed and has tucked himself away in his pants again.

"All of it, Billy." It's not voiced as a request.

Billy tries to swallow the rush of feelings he's dealing with, and obediently removes his boxers. He is hard, almost painfully so, and he stands stock-still as Steve examines him. He'd feel embarrassed if he wasn't so preoccupied with his erection, and if he wasn't trying

too hard to read Steve's gaze.

It's not critical... that's the important thing. There is no cruel assessment in Steve's eyes. Rather, Steve is drinking him in with a devotion bordering on awe.

Finally, he nods, almost to himself.

"Alright, sweetheart. First things first..." Steve takes a few steps over to Billy and cups his face in his hands. "Breathe with me." He takes a slow breath in and out.

Billy lets out a sound between a huff and a sob... he's caught on, he knows what Steve is doing.

Steve's trying to get him to calm down.

Steve's not going to let him cum.

It's stupid, and a part of him reminds Billy that he can cum if he wants to, can toss Steve out of the apartment and have ten hookers in his room in fifteen minutes if he wants.

But he doesn't want. He wants Steve to let him cum and Steve isn't doing that.

"Shhhh..." That's Steve. Billy's eyes lock onto his like a begging child, and Steve smiles. "You'll get to cum, Billy. I promise. It'll be so good. You'll cum on my cock, baby."

At that promise Billy nearly tips over the edge right there, untouched. He's stopped by Steve's hand on his dick, squeezing the base firmly.

"Not yet, Billy. You're my good boy. Not yet."

Billy lets out a harsh breath and focuses all his attention on calming himself down. There's a flicker of something in Steve's eyes then, and he leans in close, rests his forehead against Billy's.

"Talk to me. Are you okay?"

Billy nods.

“Talk, honey.”

“I’m okay,” Billy’s voice still sounds raspy and used from the blow job. “Jesus, Steve, I’m...” Billy doesn’t know what he is. Aroused, overwrought, pleased, upset. He concentrates on breathing. His erection is going down the more he focuses.

Steve watches him, then nods. “Wait here.”

He snags his jacket and wraps it around Billy, tugs him close in a quick hug, and then leaves. Billy is still concentrating on controlling himself and it takes him a moment to process that Steve is gone. He feels a little alone when he does realize and tugs the jacket tighter around himself.

Steve is only gone for a moment, and when he returns he is carrying a glass of water.

“Can you drink this for me, babe?”

Billy nods and accepts the glass, takes a long gulp and looks up at Steve. “Thank you,” he says.

Steve nods, shoves his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry,” he says. “We should talk about this. We can stop, I can get you off any way you like, and we can...”

“No.” Billy is firm. “I’m good. Green. It’s green.” His voice softens. “Please, Steve.”

Steve’s small smile is brighter than any city light. “Please what, Billy?”

Billy takes another gulp of water, finishing off the glass, and places it out of the way while he considers his options. He can have anything he wants... he knows Steve will give it to him, and for the first time in his life Billy finally has everything that really *matters*.

“Can you hold me again?”

If Steve is surprised he doesn’t show it. Instead he walks towards Billy, gently pushes the jacket off his shoulders, and wraps his arms

around Billy's naked form. Billy buries his face in Steve's shoulder, safe and protected, his body pressed against Steve's warm, still-clothed length. Steve doesn't say anything, just holds him like that for a long time.

After a while Steve plants a gentle kiss on Billy's neck. "My beautiful boy," he says, voice soft and loving. "My sweet Billy. So gorgeous, so sweet, so good for me. I'm so lucky. So lucky."

Something warm and dangerous curls in Billy's chest.

"Are you ready to be my good boy, baby?"

Billy nods. "Green," he says. "Yes."

"Okay."

Steve takes a couple of throw pillows from the nearest couch and lays them on the ground. With a murmured apology he slips for a moment into the bedroom but returns quickly with something in his hands. Billy recognizes the bottle of lube from the bedside dresser.

"Hands and knees, baby."

Billy obeys, using the pillows, grateful that Steve is so caring, so concerned for his comfort. More touched by the gesture than he ever thought he would be.

He stills while Steve drinks in the sight of Billy, his golden boy, his savage beauty, supported by his muscled arms and his fine thighs, on his knees, cock still heavy and waiting between his legs, his eyes wide and pupils blown with lust.

Waiting for a command, eager to please.

Steve kneels in front of Billy, lifts up one of his hands, and places the container of lube in Billy's waiting palm.

"Finger yourself open for me, baby. I want to watch."

Billy lets out something between a sigh and a moan and takes the lube, squirting a generous amount onto his fingers. Steve rises and

moves around Billy so he can watch as he cautiously dips his first finger in the crack between his cheeks.

Billy is determined to give Steve a show, so he makes a point of rubbing his finger against his hole to loosen it. He can hear Steve's breath quicken as he pushes the first finger in and lets out a tiny moan. He works the digit in and out a little, enjoying the drag of skin against skin, and then applies himself to his task with more earnestness. Soon the one finger is not enough and he adds a second.

"Slowly, sweetheart," Steve murmurs, and Billy deliberately slows, whimpering at the sound of Steve's voice. "This is too beautiful to rush... and I want you sore because of my cock, not anything else."

He is utterly and completely on display, his ass up, his tight hole stretching around his lubed-up fingers, his neglected cock dangling between his legs. He can feel Steve's gaze piercing him and he risks a look over his shoulder. Steve is looking at him like a starving man, his own cock tenting his pants, his mouth hanging open. His hungry expression sends a wave of desire shooting through Billy, and he can't help himself – he moans loudly like a whore and picks up the pace, starts to fuck himself desperately on his fingers.

"That's it, baby," Steve groans, moving around to Billy's front again and kneeling, lifting Billy's head and resting it on his lap so that his forehead is pressed against Steve's belly. He rubs his hands soothingly over Billy's scalp and down his back. "That's it. Fuck yourself, Billy. Open yourself for me. You want my cock, Billy?"

"Yeah," he moans against Steve's shirt, pressing his face into it like a child trying to hide. The rhythm of his hand never slows.

"Third finger, Billy."

Billy obeys immediately and adds another finger, keeps fucking himself open. He can't reach his prostate at this angle, it's not enough and Steve knows it.

"Steve..."

"Be my good boy, Billy," Steve says, merciless. Billy is rocking against

Steve's lap, fucking himself back onto his hand, torn in two. A desperate slut on display, whining and moaning for release, cradled in the arms of the man who is going to give him everything.

"My beautiful little cock-slut. Fuck yourself open, Billy, so you can take me. Gonna fill you up, baby. You're so fucking beautiful like this, all desperate and needy. Wanting my cock. I want to take you hard and deep," Billy lets out another moan that is almost a sob, "and I need you spread out and stretched for me. How does it feel, baby?"

"Feels good..." Steve's shirt is damp from the sweat and tears leaking out of Billy. "It's not enough. Feel full with my fingers but it's not enough. Steve, please..."

"Not yet, Billy. Not yet. Are you going to cum?"

"Steve..."

"Do you need help, baby?"

"Yes," Billy groans. "Please, Steve."

He feels Steve reach into his pocket and pull something out – a cock ring. Billy lets out a small sob. He's torn between disappointment and relief – he's not going to get to cum yet, but he's going to have help staying in control, being good for his lover. Steve is going to help him.

"Do you want it, sweetheart?"

"Yes," Billy nods into Steve's lap, desperation etched in every word. "Please, Steve... green. I want to be a good boy. Please..."

"You are good. Hey, look at me Billy. Look up, sweetheart." Billy lifts his head and Steve cradles his face in his hands. He's so beautiful up there above Billy, holding him. He looks like a god, and he forces Billy to maintain eye contact.

"You are good," he says, deadly serious. "You're my good boy, my beautiful Billy... you're perfect, so perfect for me. You understand me?"

It's almost more than Billy can bear.

He's not good, he knows that. He's a monster, a mobster, a criminal, a bad guy.

But Steve... Steve is good. Steve's a good man.

And the way Steve is looking at him now, like Billy's a good boy... a good *man*, too... Billy can almost believe him.

Steve sees the shadow of doubt in his face and frowns a little.

He leans down and kisses Billy.

Billy hadn't realized that they hadn't kissed before now, and the feel of it almost sweeps him away, down a deep dark rabbit hole from which he fears he might never emerge. The kiss is so sweet, so tender, so *real* that the rules of the game they are playing evaporate.

"I love you," Steve murmurs against Billy's mouth.

Billy's heart stutters to a stop and his mouth suddenly goes dry.

Something feels horribly wrong, like he's breaking inside.

You need to say it back.

He opens his mouth but nothing emerges but a gasp.

Say it back! Before you blow this, before he leaves...!

You mean it, you do, you love him...

Please, Billy begs the horrible twisted child inside of him.

Please let me go. Let me say it.

He closes his eyes. He doesn't want to see Steve's face when he destroys this again. All because he is too weak and too broken to say three little words.

"I love you," Steve says again, planting another kiss against Billy's lips.

Steve's voice hasn't changed.

Billy's eyes pop open in shock and Steve smiles down at him.

"I love you. It's alright. You don't have to say it back."

He leans over and slips the cock ring in place and a part of Billy relaxes at the knowledge that at the very least he won't cum without permission. Steve then gently removes Billy's fingers from where they are still thrusting weakly in and out of his aching hole.

He pulls something else out of his pocket – a black plug, one of the ones from the bedroom – and shows it to Billy, his eyes a silent question. When Billy nods, Steve takes the lube, adds a generous amount to the plug, and inserts it into Billy's fluttering hole, keeping him stretched and full. He takes a moment to admire the view and the look in his eyes makes Billy go red-faced.

Steve gently manhandles Billy onto his back, carefully not to jostle the plug, and rests Billy's head and back against the pillows so he is comfortable. When he's satisfied with how Billy is positioned, he drapes himself over his lover.

"I love you," Steve says again, giving Billy another kiss. "And it's okay if you don't say it back. If you can't. I know you, Billy Hargrove. I know you're good, and that you want to please me, that you care for me, that you want to protect me from all the bad things out there in the world. I know you're brave and strong and smart, and I know you want to use all that strength and cleverness to keep me safe and happy.

"I know that you even want to protect me from yourself, and I know that that drives you nuts because you also want to be with me, and you can't quite make those things match up in your head.

"I know that, and I love you for it. For all of it. You don't have to say it."

"I do," the words are out before Billy even thinks about them. "I do have to say it. You deserve it, I don't deserve you, I'm not good, I'm..."

“Stop,” Steve barks in that voice... oh hell, the voice is back, that powerful voice that makes Billy weak at the knees.

Steve wraps his hand around Billy chin, his fingers drifting down a little to his throat. No real pressure – just a warning.

“You are good,” Steve says in that tone that brooks no argument. “You are my good man. My sweetheart. My golden prince. My strong protector. My gentle, obedient boy.”

“Yes,” Billy whispers.

He says it and he means it because Steve won’t allow it to be otherwise.

“Let me show you,” Steve murmurs, sensing Billy’s lingering doubt and determined to erase it. He reaches over and grabs Billy’s tie from where it had fallen on the floor, and helps Billy turn over on his side.

“Hands behind your back.”

Billy obeys, and Steve uses the tie to bind his hands behind him before rolling him over again.

“Comfortable?” Steve asks, his brow furrowed. Billy wiggles a bit for leverage and positions himself on the pillows so that no weight is on his hands.

“Yes,” he says, and Steve grins.

Steve leans in and kisses him, the soft press of his lips deepening into a more pressing exploration, his tongue lapping in and massaging Billy’s mouth. They kiss until Billy’s brain is hazy from it, and then Steve pulls away and begins to work his way down Billy’s body.

He spends a good amount of time on Billy’s neck, sucking bruises there that will show, that everyone will be able to see – marking him, claiming him. Billy’s toes curl at the wet drag of Steve’s tongue as he swipes it across his Adam’s apple. His mouth catches against the skin and he lingers, breathing his lover in, his teeth hovering above Billy’s throat, his nose buried in the vulnerable spot above his jugular.

The hum of barely contained violence thrums through them both.

When he is satisfied with the marks he's left on Billy's throat, Steve moves on down to his chest. He lets out a small groan at the sight of Billy's skin, sets to teasing and suckling on Billy's nipples. Billy has never been overly conscious of his nipples, but now, with Steve going at them and his own hands tied behind his back, they're on fire.

"Such pretty tits, baby," Steve murmurs, fondling and plucking at his pecs for a moment before lowering his mouth again.

Steve licks and nibbles on one nub, pulling at it gently with his teeth, and then moves to the other one, leaving the first to pebble, damp and pert and sensitive in the cold air. He does this again and again until Billy thinks he might explode, go mad from the teasing.

His breaths are going out in hitching moans and whines, and he's... oh, he's coming apart.

Steve's leaves off, finally, and drifts down further, pausing now and again to worship another unexpected inch of Billy's body – the jutting hip bone, the soft area under his belly button, his ticklish sides.

"I always liked this space just here," Steve says, gently massaging Billy's belly, just under his belly button and above his groin. Billy relaxes into the tender warmth of Steve's hand rubbing circles against his skin.

"This is mine," Steve proclaims, using a little more pressure as Billy writhes in longing. "This too," he adds, pressing down on the V of Billy's hips. He leans down and licks a long stripe across the area, nuzzling it and nipping gently at the exposed skin. "And this..."

He spends quite a bit of time decorating Billy's inner thigh with another set of hickeys and bruises, the suction of his mouth and the tug of his teeth sending Billy dancing on the edge between pain and pleasure.

"Steve," Billy whimpers. "Mfhhh...!"

He strains against the tie binding his hands but the knot holds... he is at Steve's mercy.

Steve sucks harder until the bruise he is creating on Billy's left thigh, so close to his cock and yet not nearly close enough, tips from a pleasure-pain feeling to an electrifying shock that puts Billy right on edge.

And always, always Billy wants more of it. It's so good.

At last Steve reaches Billy's poor cock, straining and red against the chastity device. He pushes Billy's knees up so that he's fully exposed, takes in the sight of Billy's restrained member and his pucker stretched around the plug. Steve gives the plug a little tap and then traces the red, aching ring of muscle delicately with one finger. A violent tremor goes through Billy at the sensation, and Steve rubs his thumb over his perineum, applying gentle pressure in retaliation.

"So pretty, baby," Steve coos. "Such a gorgeous ass. You're gonna take me there. I'm gonna pound my fat cock into that hole, baby. Use it, wreck it, make it my hole."

Steve lowers Billy's knees and leans down and all Billy can think of is how desperate he is to get Steve's hand or mouth on him, how desperately his cock needs something, anything, any kind of friction. However, Steve allows himself only a swipe of the tongue up and down Billy's member, just enough to taste the precum leaking out of Billy's cockhead. He then nuzzles at Billy's balls, lapping at them like a playful kitten. He cradles them in one hand and gives them a little squeeze, a casual display of ownership that knocks a rough cry out of Billy.

"These are mine too, sweetheart," Steve murmurs. "Aren't they?"

Billy gasps and shakes his head, whimpers pouring out of him without his consent.

"Who does this all belong to, Billy?" Steve asks. He doesn't sound angry or annoyed or demanding. He sounds like he already knows the answer and is teaching Billy, gently coaxing Billy into admitting something he already knows. And Billy does know. Billy knows the answer.

"Who does this all belong to?" Steve asks again.

"You," Billy chokes out as Steve gives his balls another squeeze.

"Who's going to take care of you, Billy?"

"You... you are..."

"It's good, isn't it? Isn't it, sweetheart?"

It is. It really is.

"S'good. So good. Steve..."

"Who does this belong to?"

"You." No hesitation this time.

"Who takes care of you?"

"You do."

"It's good, isn't it baby? You like it."

That last one is more a statement than a question, but Billy answers it anyway.

"I like it. I want it... please, Steve...."

"You love it."

Steve doesn't need Billy to reply to this, and Billy doesn't get a chance anyway before Steve takes his balls, first one and then the other, into his mouth and suckles on them gently.

Billy is overwrought, hypersensitive, wants to cry and wants it to never stop.

"Steve! Please!"

Steve hums, lets Billy's balls drop from his mouth and looks up. It's the moment he's been waiting for, but he won't move until Billy says so.

"Steve..."

"Tell me, Billy," Steve's voice is suddenly harsh and demanding, his eyes fixed on Billy, his body cradled between Billy's open thighs. "Tell me what you want."

"Fuck me!" Billy cries. "I need it! Please Steve, please Sir, fuck me!"

There is no hesitation.

Steve manhandles Billy over to his front, positioning Billy's head on a pillow before dragging his hips up so that Billy is on his knees, face pushed into the floor.

Billy is panting with need, hands still twisting in their restraints, unable to fight or move. In this position he presenting his waiting ass like a bitch in heat, his hole twitching and fluttering around the plug. He wiggles and tries to push back, desperate for Steve to get inside of him, twisting his hips in a lewd attempt to gain balance.

"Please," he whispers. "Please, please...I want it..."

Steve removes the plug and the cock ring swiftly but with care and frees himself from his pants, pushing them down to his knees and lining himself up.

Without preface or warning, without anything but a loud grunt, Steve thrusts his cock into Billy's ass in one fluid movement. Billy cries out in pain and in pleasure, the stretch so much more than his fingers and the plug, reaching so much deeper, and so, so good. It's a sharp, clean feeling and it knocks all the fog and cobwebs away until all that's left is a glorious technicolor clarity.

Full, at long last... full and mastered and owned. Both of them right where they should be.

There's a stuttering movement as Steve shifts and moves somehow deeper into Billy. More and more, until Steve is completely sheathed inside, his balls nestled firmly against Billy's ass.

"Who do you belong to?" Steve hisses, his teeth latching onto Billy's neck and tugging, and Billy has never been so fully and willingly Steve's eager and desperate slave, his boy, his bitch as he is in that moment.

“You,” Billy gasps, his hands fists behind his back, his eyes filling with delicious tears. “Steve Harrington, I belong to you.”

Steve withdraws and then thrusts in again and again, fast and hard, with barely controlled violence.

“Say it again.”

“I’m yours, I’m yours,” Billy sobs as his entire body jerks forward again and again with every perfect thrust. He wants to push back but he can’t get leverage, he can’t get anything but what Steve gives him. His body can only be used for Steve’s pleasure, a willing fuck toy, spread out and claimed.

Steve begins to pound into him mercilessly with quick, deep strokes, and Billy feels wildly out of control as he submits and takes it. His cries stutter, broken by the sheer force of Steve’s thrusts, rising and falling ‘nuh’ sounds punched out of him. Billy can hear the tell-tale slap of skin against skin, can feel Steve’s balls smacking against his ass. Steve shifts, hitches up Billy’s hips, and starts hitting his prostate with his thrusts, making Billy wail, a half-sobbing cry.

He feels wave after wave of pleasure and... relief.

It’s so good... so good... and Steve is giving it to him, Billy’s not in control, Steve is in control. He’s being opened up and exposed and used like a fucking slut and he loves it, he loves it, oh fuck... he’s Steve’s little sex bitch and he loves it...

Steve brings his hand down in a heavy smack on Billy’s ass and Billy feels his cock give a little squirt of precum. Steve runs a hand over the spot and gives the tender flesh a proprietorial squeeze.

“That feel good, Billy?” Steve pants. “You like it when your owner spansks you?”

“Yesss,” Billy feels like he’s choking on his own need. “Yes, master, yes, sir... please give it to me... Steve...please, I...”

He’s Steve’s, he belongs to Steve. Steve who is carving him open with his cock. Steve, who is fucking him like a machine right now, hard and fast and good, so fucking good. Steve, whose cock is long and

thick, and it almost hurts, almost... it pushes out everything else so there's nothing but that one repeated movement. Steve, whose every thrust is hitting his prostate, making Billy see stars, making him slip into this raw and beautiful state. Steve who is giving it to him, giving him what he needs.

Steve, who made Billy break and bend and unravel who is going to put him back together again.

It's that knowledge, that thought that breaks through Billy's core and wipes out all other things from his head. Steve broke him, Steve's taking him apart utterly, and Steve is going to put him back together. Billy is safe with Steve. Billy is *good* with Steve.

Steve has Billy bent over and restrained, is pounding his ass, is owning him, is making him his.

Billy has no power and Steve has all the power and he's not going to abuse it. He's going to use it to take Billy to the top of the mountain.

Billy is home. Billy belongs.

"Cum for me, baby."

The words are hissed in his ear, breaking through the swirling rush.

Billy never knew that he could orgasm on command before.

He cums harder than he ever has in his life and goes temporarily blind with sensation.

He's floating.

Steve keeps fucking into his used, oversensitive hole.

It takes him a moment to come down but when he does Billy can feel the raw hypersensitivity all over. It makes Billy want to whine and cry and beg Steve to stop as the thrusts dance on the edge of painful, but as the cum dribbles out of his spent member and he struggles to catch his breath he finds that he can't. He lets out a whimper but he doesn't beg. Instead, he forces himself to clench his hole and milk Steve's cock as best he can... to serve and please his lover.

Steve's answering cry as Billy works his ass is reward enough.

He can take it. For Steve, he can take it.

For himself too. He can let this moment strip away the last bits of doubt.

He doesn't want it to stop. It still feels too good.

He's good. He's so good.

Steve finally cums and Billy feels the sweet heat filling him up, filling up that space Steve has carved out for himself in Billy's pliant body. Steve can't hold them up anymore and they both fall, collapsing to the side still attached to each other, panting, sweaty, exhausted.

For a moment they can do nothing but lay there, Steve softening but still decidedly inside of Billy, Billy's hole clenching and twitching of its own volition.

When he finally catches his breath somewhat, Steve starts to pull out.

Billy lets out a low whine.

"Baby...?" Steve looks up.

"The plug," Billy rasps. "Please..."

It takes Steve a moment to get what Billy is saying, but when he does, blushing, he slips out the rest of the way and replaces his cock with the plug from earlier, keeping his seed sealed up inside Billy, keeping him full.

Billy lets out a low groan and Steve nearly dry orgasms at the sight of his strong, fierce golden boy fucked out and exhausted, his hands still tied behind his back, the plug nestled firmly in his reddened ass.

Steve removes his ruined shirt and pushes his pants the rest of the way off, and then wraps his body around Billy's, holding him as they both continue to come down. Whatever this was... the scene is over. They both need time to come back down to earth.

Steve runs soothing hands up and down Billy's side and Billy focuses on that, gives himself over until nothing else exists but that sensation of touch. Steve catches his breath and can't help but look at Billy and think that he looks like a captured creature, magnificently powerful and strong, beautiful in his submission and vulnerability, his willing surrender.

"You're so good, Billy," he murmurs, nuzzling his lover's neck. "So beautiful. Perfect. I love you so much. You're amazing, so good..."

Billy's breath hitches and he lets out a low, happy sigh.

Their breathing evens out slowly.

"I'm going to untie you now," Steve says after many long minutes of drifting. "Billy? Is that okay? Or do you want to keep the tie?"

Steve waits patiently while Billy thinks about it.

"Can...?" Billy sounds so hesitant, but Steve doesn't mind. He looks at Billy without judgement while he plucks up the courage to speak.

"Can I keep it? Can we go to bed and you take it off when we're in bed?"

Billy's tone is so tentative, so sweet, it's amazing. "Of course, baby," Steve says. "Whatever you want, always. Let me help you up. Can you walk?"

Billy nods and lets Steve maneuver him onto his knees. From there, although his legs still feel a bit like jelly, Billy rises shakily to his feet, leaning on Steve as he does so.

He can feel the plug in his ass and he tentatively rolls his wrists against the constraints of the tie – it's comforting to know that those things haven't gone away. That he is still claimed. Still under Steve's guidance, submissive and pliant. He doesn't want to give that up just yet.

Steve walks him into the bedroom and switches on a smaller lamp, giving them just enough light to see by. He helps Billy lay down on his side on the sheets. Billy can't resist a small moan and a little

wriggle, his worn hole still clenching on the plug, his ass still full of cum, his bindings still limiting his movements.

“Do you want me to hold you a bit more?” Steve asks. “Would it be okay if I went to the kitchen and got us something?”

Billy allows himself time to consider his options before nodding.

“I’m okay. Kitchen. Can I have a water?”

“Sure.”

Steve leaves Billy to soak up the feeling of having his hands bound, of the plug. He grinds his over sensitive cock against the bed a little and relishes the sweet pleasure of it. He stretches out, lets out a satisfied sigh, and gives himself over to this drifting sense of ease and safety.

He could get used to this. Being cared for this way.

When Steve returns he is carrying a wet washcloth, two bottled waters, and a container of strawberries. He sets his gathering on the bed stand and leans over Billy.

“Want me to untie you now?”

Billy has settled now, he’s ready. “Yes. Green.”

Steve obliges, and once Billy is freed he settles in bed next to him, handing him a water. Billy lays there while Steve takes the warm washcloth and gently wipes him down, wipes away the sweat and cum, soothing and comforting. Billy thinks he might start purring soon. When Steve is satisfied that they’re both clean enough, he pulls the sheets up to cover them and opens the container of strawberries.

“We should eat these,” he says. “They’re about to go off. Jesus, I’m exhausted.”

“Yeah,” Billy says, a smile threatening to spread across his face as he rolls over on his back and feels the plug tug a little. He accepts a strawberry. “You’re something else, Steve Harrington. You know that?”

“Didn’t know I had it in me,” Steve says wryly. “Honest to God. You know, I’ve actually been told I’m too indecisive in the bedroom.”

“Who told you that?”

“An idiot, obviously. But that was during my experimental period, so maybe it was because she was a chick and I am super not-straight. Never... never done that before, though. Read about it, but never would have thought to do that.”

Billy huffs. He reaches over and runs his fingers through Steve’s hair.

“You alright?” he asks.

“Are you?” Steve counters.

“I asked first.”

“I...” Steve pauses. “It was a little scary,” he admits. “It’s strange being in charge of someone else like that. You’re always so good to me, and I wanted it to be good for you, to take care of you. What if I get it wrong? What if it isn’t any good?”

Billy’s mouth quirks up in an unhappy grin.

“I could kill whoever it was who made you feel like you were bad in bed, pretty boy.”

Steve hums shyly and lets himself lean in and bury his face in Billy’s shoulder.

“I think...” he says. “I think I’d probably feel like that anyway. It’s a lot of responsibility. I’m not sure I would want to do that every time, but it was amazing. I liked it, and I feel great. You were so wonderful, so sweet. Doing what I said, trusting me. You gave me so much back. Thank you,” he looks up and fixes Billy with what Billy is coming to think of as Steve’s ‘very serious’ expression. “Thanks for trusting me. Thanks for letting me do that.”

Billy chuckles, like Steve isn’t the one who has given *him* the greatest gift he never knew he needed. As he strokes Steve’s hair, Billy can see the marks on his wrists from the tie. He wonders if there will be

bruises later.

"In hindsight that was great forward thinking on your part," he grins. "A cock ring and a plug in your pocket. You just whipped them out... do you just carry those around, or...?"

"No! I do not!" Steve is trying very hard not to laugh. "I got them from the bedroom!"

"Any other situation and I might have cracked up when you pulled those out," Billy laughs.

"Tied you up, too," Steve grinned. "I'm like a sexy boy scout."

"That sounds really wrong, lover boy."

"Yeah, I didn't think that one through."

"Were you ever a boy scout?" Billy asks after a beat. He needs to add to his Steve-knowledge.

"For two years. I hated every minute of it. I hate camping. I get poison ivy every time I'm outside – it's like a curse. And Scoutmaster Dave was a douchebag. You?"

The eye-roll Billy gives Steve is eloquent. "I'm surprised I wasn't made to, to be honest. Dad's real big on rules and respect."

Steve snorts. "Yeah... 'yes, sir', 'no, sir', 'thank you sir, may I have another'. Bullshit you say to their face and then two seconds later you're back behind the shed writing 'Scoutmaster Dave wears women's underwear' on the wall. Not that there's anything wrong with women's underwear."

Billy shakes himself out of a grim train of thought and raises his eyebrow. "Is this your way of telling me you'd be up for that?"

"Well, if my stupid-rich boyfriend wanted to pick out some silk panties for me I wouldn't say no to modelling them."

The mental image sends a thrum through Billy. "I can't believe you're the same loser who ran out of the strip club on our first date."

Steve shakes his head. "That was different, and you know it. You knew it then."

Billy has to admit the truth of that. "Sorry."

Steve looks over at Billy for a long moment and Billy tries to cover whatever he is seeing by scooping up another strawberry and munching on it.

"I'm not," Steve says, finally. "I'm not sorry it happened. I'm a little sorry you felt like you needed to do it. Like you needed to be an asshole to be with me."

Billy snorts at that. "I think the point was that I was trying to *not* be with you. Like a fucking moron." He pauses and then continues. "In answer to your earlier question... yes, I'm okay. I've never done that before. It's never been like that."

"Scary?" Steve murmurs.

"For a moment. I wasn't scared of you. I was scared of me. Of being..." Billy trails off, but Steve knows what he is trying to say.

"Weak," he says mildly, and Billy gives him a slight nod, though that word is an inadequate descriptor for what Billy fears. "Well, stick with me, kid. Thank God I'm smarter than you. Keep you from slipping up too much."

Billy snorts again and lays back in the bed. They don't talk for a long time, but Steve's fingers find Billy's and they intertwine.

"You're staying... right?" Billy asks.

He doesn't know why he asks that, exactly. He just needs to hear the answer.

"Yes," Steve says. "I'm staying."

They lapse into silence again. Steve scoops up the remains of the strawberries and places them on the nightstand before flicking off the lamp. It's a casual moment of domesticity, but it solidifies for Billy, even more than Steve's 'yes', that Steve is in fact not going to leave.

He's here, he thinks. When I look over in the morning, he'll be there.

He's here.

I love him.

"I call my dad 'sir'." Billy is more surprised than Steve is when he breaks the silence.

Steve doesn't say anything and for a moment Billy thinks he might have fallen asleep, but then the fingers wrapped around his squeeze gently, anchoring him.

Billy stares at the ceiling. Somehow the ceiling is easier to talk to.

"I hate it," Billy admits, finally. He's set them on this path now, for whatever reason, and he needs to push through it. Like with their scene, Billy needs to push past fears of being weak and start to trust Steve a little.

"He makes me call him 'sir' when he gives me orders, and when I've fucked up. He's not 'dad' then. He's 'sir' and I hate it."

Billy pauses and thinks about this.

"I guess I hate it. It also makes it easier sometimes. Like he's my boss and not my dad. Like he's not supposed to care about me. If he's not supposed to care than the fact that he doesn't care doesn't matter."

He's not sure that makes sense, but it's what he feels.

"You, um..." Steve hesitates, unsure if he should bring this up. Maybe Billy wasn't aware of it, but... "you called me 'sir'. Before."

The thought of it fills Steve with a crushing guilt. He'd never touch Billy again if he thought he was anywhere close to the same level as Neil Hargrove in Billy's head.

"That was different," Billy says. He means it. It's strange, perhaps, illogical... but it's true. "I wasn't thinking of him. I didn't think of him at all."

"That's a relief," Steve jokes weakly. "Doesn't say much for my technique if you're thinking of your dad while we're fucking."

Billy snorts. "Really though. I didn't think of him at all. I didn't even think about what he would think of me... doing that."

He thinks about the marks on his skin, gingerly touches the hickeys on his throat. In the past he'd have to cover them or make up some story about how a woman did them. It matters less now that the fault-lines of his and Neil's relationship have been exposed, but still, in the past that would have been his primary concern. Hiding the evidence. Hiding from himself.

He tries to picture the look that would have been on Neil's face if he had seen his son and heir with his hands tied behind him, taking it up the ass from a twink teacher. His imagination is curiously blank on that point.

He thinks of his deadline.

Maybe he won't cover up the marks this time.

Or maybe he should just enjoy tonight.

"It was just you," he says, half to himself, his voice soft. "Just us."

"It was good, though. Right?" That crack in Steve's voice is familiar, and with a pang Billy is suddenly painfully aware that he does love Steve. All of Steve. The protective warrior and the insecure, sweet nerd. He loves them both, and wants them both, and wants every other kind of Steve that shows up. Good and bad.

"It's good," Billy croaks. "It's the opposite with you. When I called you sir it was because I knew you were taking care of me."

The boys lay in silence for a moment.

"This is probably too Freudian for the bedroom," Billy admits.

"I teach art, man," Steve agrees. "This shit is beyond me."

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm strung out on caffeine but your kudos and comments give me life! <3

7. Epilogue

Three months later

Steve's alarm goes off. He hurries to silence it, but it doesn't matter. The lump next to him hears the cheerful tune emanating from his phone and lets out a pained grunt.

Steve winces internally, though to be honest he's more amused than concerned.

The lump snuffles in irritation and Steve estimates that he's got about five seconds before...

A heavy arm wraps around his middle and drags him down into warm sheets, presses him firmly against sweet-smelling bare skin.

"Nuh," the lump murmurs.

"Billy..." Steve has to fight every instinct he has not to bury himself deeper in his lover's arms and stay there indefinitely.

"Nuh."

"Seriously, I can't be late again..."

"Nuh... too early."

Steve finds himself grinning fondly. Billy, he has learned, is not a morning person. Steve has always gotten up before dawn so that he can get to school in plenty of time, but Billy, ever the night owl, is not built for mornings. In fact, he seems to feel personally affronted every time Steve tries to leave his bed.

The only thing that annoys him more is when Steve offers to sleep somewhere else so he doesn't wake Billy up when he needs to leave.

"I can just go back to my apartment," Steve sometimes insists, not noticing how Billy's eyes narrow dangerously and his fingers twitch. "It's fine, Billy... I'll pop out and you can sleep in..."

Unacceptable.

Steve must be in Billy's bed or Billy must be in Steve's, or there better be a damn good reason why not.

Steve acquiesces. It's hardly a trial for him, and not the most important point the two men have needed to reach a compromise on (Billy has finally begrudgingly accepted that Steve is still living in his own place, though the glint in his eye does make Steve wonder how long that truce will last).

Billy has won this round, but that fact does not make him any more manageable in the mornings.

Steve tries to untangle himself but is pulled back down again. He laments not wearing a shirt to sleep in when Billy's clever hands find his chest and start caressing his skin, when he starts pressing kisses there.

"Billy..." he warns.

"Don't go yet... I've got a present for you," Billy says, his mouth worrying Steve's left nipple.

"I don't have time," Steve groans, trying to shuffle out of bed and failing. "Stop... Billy...I need to..."

"You woke me up, bitch," Billy huffs, smirking. "Brought it on yourself."

Steve opens his mouth to protest but the words are lost in a moan as Billy plunges his hand down and grasps his cock firmly at the root, massaging it with his fingers. Billy bites Steve's nipple gently, grinning.

"Shower," Steve forces out.

Billy hums a question, his mouth still latched on to Steve's flesh.

“At least... give me my present in the shower.” Steve makes a valiant effort to drag them both to the edge of the bed without dislodging Billy and interrupting his ministrations. “I gotta get to work, we need to multitask.”

Billy does blow Steve in the shower, and when he's finished he cums all over Steve's chest, his and Steve's hands both wrapped around his dick, while Steve looks on with a blissed, sated expression on his face.

Steve runs around like a headless chicken afterwards trying to get ready... he'll make it on time, but just barely. Billy, grinning, clad only in his boxers, and leaning casually in the doorway of his kitchen, eats a piece of toast and watches him.

“Don't need to look so smug, you bastard,” Steve grumbles. “Where's my...”

“On the coffee table,” Billy supplies.

“Thanks,” Steve scoops up his papers. He catches Billy's eye, gives him a sweet little grin, and stops his fussing long enough to let Billy hand-feed him a bit of toast. He licks the butter off Billy's fingers (*very dangerous, Steven*, Billy's heated gaze tells him) and plants a gentle kiss on the corner of Billy's mouth before scurrying away to collect more of his belongings. “Worse ways to wake up, though. Thank you for my present.”

Billy shakes his head, his smug smile widening. “Your present is in your book bag. I'm looking forward to you opening it.”

Steve stops and glances up at Billy warily. “What did you do?”

“You'll like it, baby. For tonight.”

“Tonight... I'm chaperoning the school dance, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Billy rolls his eyes. The end of school extravaganza. Both Steve and Max have been driving him up the wall about this stupid dance – Max with her preteen angst and Steve with his planning committee struggles. He was going to be very happy when this much lauded event was behind them.

"I'll pick you up," Billy says. "11:00, right?"

"Way to make me sound like a virgin on prom night."

"Well, we can always 'park' after."

Steve is half under the sofa still looking for his shoes so it takes him a moment to register what Billy is proposing. When he does he goes bright red and snorts. "I haven't had car sex since I was in high school."

"Well if you ask Max, there's nothing I love more than my car," Billy grins. "But I'm thinking there's actually nothing I'd like more than you riding me in it."

Steve's fumbles tying his shoelaces and Billy has to fight down the urge to laugh.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Billy rolls his eyes. "Now get out of here, princess, before you're late."

There are times in your life when the shake, rattle and roll of the world drops away and all that is left is breathtaking clarity.

Billy experiences that now.

Life... life in the cold light of day.

It is not so bad, really.

Billy sees Steve's face in his mind's eye as he takes his gun out of its case and goes through the process of disassembling, cleaning, and reassembling it. He should maybe be putting himself in some kind of zone, should embrace the red blood-lust that sometimes drives him. He should think of all the times he was bullied and abused, of all the humiliations and hurts he has suffered at the hands of that one

towering figure in his life. He should sort through his memories, his feelings, his scars.

That fear and pain is always what defined him in the past.

The fog and mist, the ghosts.

Today the ghosts are gone.

This time is different.

Today is his deadline.

He is calm and collected because he is doing this for Steve.

He has spent too much time waiting, too much time in fear and regret. When he set the deadline he half expected never to reach it... he thought Neil Hargrove might have made his move, or that he himself might have decided he'd had enough. When he had set the deadline he had half thought that he might never see Steve again, and if he didn't have Steve then he couldn't be sure that there was a point to any of it...

But that doesn't matter now. It doesn't matter now because the deadline has arrived, and Billy knows what he wants.

The deadline wasn't anything other than this - on this day, Billy Hargrove will know what he wants. On this day, Billy Hargrove will become what he is supposed to be. On this day, Billy Hargrove will stop drifting and dreaming and start living.

He knows what he wants and he knows what it will take to get it, and he has decided that he's willing to do what it takes.

For Max. For Steve. For himself.

For himself.

He tucks the gun away inside his suit and goes to visit his father.

“But her brother is a gangster! What if you kiss her and he gets mad and decides to whack you?”

“WHACK me?” Lucas’s eyebrows could not go any further up his forehead if he tried. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard...”

“He’s scary, sure,” Dustin elbows Mike. “He isn’t any scarier than Hopper, though. If you try to kiss El...”

Any attempts to adjust clothing and hair in the school bathroom’s mirror are completely suspended as Mike and Dustin tussle briefly. They both come up laughing while Lucas snorts in fond annoyance and Will nervously readjusts his tie.

“They won’t get mad,” Mike speaks with a confidence he doesn’t quite feel.

“Besides,” Will pipes up. “Mr. Harrington can always distract Max’s brother if he does get mad, Lucas. They’re dating.”

“Ew! No way!”

“They so are!”

“They always smile at each other whenever Billy picks Max up.”

“Oh, they smile at each other,” Dustin waves his hands around to emphasize his derision. “Whatever.”

“Boys!”

There is a sharp knock on the bathroom door and the various members of The Party throw one last glance at the mirror before scurrying out of the bathroom.

Mr. Harrington is there in the hallway waiting for them, familiar and safe in his glasses and his comfortable shoes, looking like he always does except that he’s wearing a slightly nicer suit jacket than usual in deference to the occasion. He is chaperoning tonight, and had agreed to give the boys one last look over before they went into the dance -

"Because your hair is always perfect, Mr. H... please?"

It's the night of the Hawkins Prep 'Fantasy Forest' School Dance. It is late for the boys, nearly 7:30 pm. Tomorrow is the first day of summer vacation. Being in the school building after hours and seeing their teacher and each other in suits and ties fills the boys with a strange, almost magical feeling, like anything could happen tonight.

"Alright, let's see how we're looking." Mr. Harrington grins down at his students with unapologetic fondness.

The boys line up, beaming while their teacher makes a show of evaluating their appearances, adjusting a skewed tie there and a stray cow-lick here. Even the usually surly Mike can't help the upward twitch of his mouth.

"You look great, guys," he says finally, a slow, proud smile spreading across his whole face. "Really great. Now you're gonna go in there... you look like a million bucks... and you're gonna slam it. Yeah? You ready to go knock 'em dead?"

The boys take off towards the school auditorium while Steve follows behind, hands in his pockets and a fragile bubble of contentment in his chest.

Billy is hurting but he doesn't want to stop. It would take too long to separate the physical pain from the ruptures in his heart and soul, anyway. He doesn't want to take the time right now.

It's not like the things he feels are strange things, unusual or alien to him. No, they are all too familiar, and isn't that a horrible truth? Billy is so very, very well acquainted with all the ways a person can hurt.

He is sure that in time he will be fine.

Too late now, anyway, for second-guessing and regret. Always too late for that.

He'll survive.

He always does.

He wants to get to Steve.

To Steve... to the place where nothing hurts.

He drives fast through the dark night.

The school parking lot behind the main building is lit up by some scattered streetlamps, though Billy finds himself more drawn to the light of the moon overhead. The lot is almost empty – most parents are picking their kids up from the dance at the front entrance – and Billy parks in a dark corner and climbs out of his car.

The dance is nearly over. He spots his lover hovering by the double doors at the back entrance, sneaking away from his chaperoning duties, talking to Tommy. Tommy, of all people.

Steve.

Steve standing in a pool of artificial light. His brown hair and his soft skin, his sweet smile and his wide eyes. The promise of a future... a good future.

More aches rush into Billy, more things that feel like pain but which are actually so much sweeter. Things that heal as they hurt.

Something stirs in Billy's gut at the sight of Tommy and Steve leaning against the brick wall of the school, chatting. Maybe it's the moon, or the blood on his (soul) teeth... either way he feels like a wolf tonight. He moves towards his prey, who turns and spots him and lights up like a Christmas tree in happiness.

"So, this is you being discrete, huh?" Billy snaps at Tommy as he approaches them, his casual gait hiding the suddenly sharpened pain he's feeling in his right side. Tommy at least has the good grace to look abashed.

"Shhh," Steve's smile never wavers as he goes over to Billy and takes his hand. "I have met Tommy before, you know? We met when I

visited your place? It's not his fault. I spotted him a while ago and caught him just now when I was chasing down some seventh graders smoking behind the dumpster. He really was being very slick. Stealthy, like a ninja."

Billy feels his aches and his anger and his jealousy ease slightly, but that doesn't stop him from giving Tommy a look. Tommy shuffles a little and then makes a jerking movement with his chin.

"You alright, boss?"

Billy hadn't told Tommy about the deadline – he hadn't told anybody – but he has a feeling Tommy won't be overly surprised when he hears the news.

"Fine. Check on Max."

"Sure, boss." Tommy's eyes flick over to Steve, who grins at him.

"I'll text it to you later," Steve says, and a goofy, ridiculous smile spreads across the henchman's face as he saunters off on patrol.

"What's that about?" Billy asks in a low voice.

"He asked for my friend Carol's number. You know Carol... she teaches P.E.? You met her at the last parent-teacher conference."

Billy shrugs. He's man enough to admit that he only has eyes for Steve.

"He's seen her around while he was looking after Max - and me, too, apparently? - and asked me to put in a good word. That's what we were discussing... so you can cool it with the caveman bullshit, yes?" Steve smacks Billy lightly on the arm, a playful gesture belying a very serious sentiment. He is managing not to bristle at the implications of Billy's sudden mood, but it's a very near thing.

Billy hums noncommittally.

Inside the auditorium, just past the double doors behind Steve, the DJ announces the last song of the night. As Sting starts playing, Billy finds himself rocking slightly, pulling Steve a little closer. It's as close

as he can get to dancing at the moment, and he silently promises himself that he'll take Steve on a proper night out as soon as he's able.

"I'm kind of pissed you put a protection detail on me without telling me, by the way," Steve adds. "But I can't expect miracles, I guess."

No, he can't. He can't expect Billy to leave him unprotected, and he sure as hell can't expect Billy to apologize for it.

Billy doesn't do him the discourtesy of pretending to be anything other than what he is. Instead, he changes the subject.

"You get my gift?" Billy murmurs, gently placing his hand on Steve's hip and drinking sight of the teacher in.

"Mmhum..." Steve hums an affirmative, but that's not what Billy wants to hear.

"Nuh uh..." Billy raises his eyebrow and gives Steve's side a gentle pinch, a little reminder. "Answer me properly."

Steve goes bright red (he always goes red... Billy loves that, prays that that never changes) and ducks his head slightly in embarrassment and arousal.

Tommy is very deliberately checking the perimeter and not looking their way.

"Yes, daddy," Steve whispers after a beat, unable to keep the smile out of his voice.

"And are you wearing them?"

"Yes, daddy."

A pair of red silk panties are (barely) covering Steve's (perfect) ass under his suitably conservative slacks, and the thought sends a shiver down Billy's spine. He slips his fingers down past the edge of Steve's pants and feels the smooth material. He's pleased that his lover is wearing them, and he has every intention of ripping them off him with his teeth later that evening. If he destroys them in the process,

that's fine... he's got a whole arsenal of lingerie just for Steve.

Billy leans in and cradles the back of Steve's head, pressing his lips to his temple. Steve's free hand slides down Billy's chest and wraps itself around his waist.

"What are you doing for summer vacation, Mr. Harrington?" Billy asks, fingers caressing Steve's neck.

Steve snorts and shakes his head. "Picking up summer work so I can make rent."

"Steven..." there's a warning in Billy's voice. As if Billy would ever allow that (and Steve knows damn well he wouldn't, and he accepts it, but still he can't resist poking the bear a little).

"You have a better offer in mind?" Steve teases.

Oh, does he ever... so many plans, so many deals, so many offers. A lifetime's worth.

Start living.

"You ever been to California, pretty boy?" Billy asks, his gaze flicking up at the pure light of the moon. "How about Mexico?"

Steve's hand stutters to a stop suddenly, pausing over something strange on Billy's torso. "Baby... why are you wet? Billy, are you bleeding?"

"S'okay, sweetheart," Billy hums. "It's not bad. Thought I patched it, but it must have opened again when I was driving."

"What...?"

"It's okay, Steve. I promise." Billy leans back to look in his boyfriend's eyes, cupping his face in his hand. "I promise, baby."

And it is okay. It's not a bad hurt, not fatal. It's a shallow wound, the bite of a knife, the last, desperate act of a dead man. Neil's final little 'fuck you'. The sins of the father made flesh.

The hurts that Steve should fear lie much deeper than Billy's skin.

Steve sucks in a shaky breath and lets it out again. There is a long moment of stillness, delicate like a bubble and as tense as a taut wire, as he fights to regain control of himself. His eyes flutter shut, and Billy pulls him a little closer, burying his face in Steve's hair. Steve doesn't answer verbally but he presses his hand to Billy's side, putting pressure on the wound, a barrier between it and the damp dark of the school parking lot.

Is it enough? Steve wonders, imagining his weak hand holding out horrors, holding in Billy. *Will it ever be enough?*

Billy revels in the pressure, in the tender touch. Steve's long, strong fingers curl around his hurt and give him just the right sensations, the perfect balance of comfort and pain-sharpened clarity. Perfect. He smiles into Steve's hair.

"When do you want to go on this wonderful vacation, then?" Steve asks, voice rough, his head still buried in Billy's shoulder.

"Two weeks sound good?"

Can't go next week, after all, Billy thinks. *I'll have a funeral to go to.*

Notes for the Chapter:

That's all for now, folks! I love these two jerks and this particular AU so if anyone has any ideas for one-shots they'd like to see, please send them my way :)
As always, your kudos and comments keep me going.
Stay golden, you lovely stardust people!

8. Outtake - A portrait of a lover

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy finds Steve's painting of him

Notes for the Chapter:

Wrote this outtake but ended up cutting it... posted on request for PositivelyDying <3

He doesn't mean to be nosy.

Truly. He's not snooping. He knows Steve doesn't have any secrets from him (not any big secrets, anyway... he hasn't mentioned accidentally finding Steve's secret cache of hair products or his Pat Benatar CDs yet, but it's good to know about these things regardless). He's doing that lazy-curious thing people do sometimes, particularly with those they love, where they casually explore another's belongings while bored. He's not searching for anything in particular and he only finds what he finds by accident.

He loves Steve's paintings. So much.

They're always so colorful, so complicated, so alive. They show everyone and everything that stumbles into Steve's world. And Steve gives it all back as good as he gets. He takes the things he sees and makes them even more beautiful, even more vibrant.

Billy wishes he could see things like Steve sees things. He wishes he could make things better instead of worse.

Billy's world is one of darkness and smoke. Other people are commodities or threats, whether they are alive and kicking or cold and lifeless.

Strange landscapes, alien selves. Sweat and blood and slick oil and death.

There is no sweet loveliness in what Billy does or is.

Billy wishes sometimes that he could be more. Could be better. But he is what he is... it is inescapable.

When Steve sits in the bathroom with him, perched on the edge of the tub and wiping away the blood from Billy's bruised and battered hands, Billy doubts very much that Steve is seeing anything beautiful in him. When Billy stumbles back late and hurting, or buzzing and on fire from his latest kill, his precious teacher focuses on Billy's wounds, his face scrunched up in barely contained terror and concern. He doesn't quite meet Billy's eyes then, needs to shield his gaze a little on those nights when Billy shines so bright.

Billy sees Steve's doubts, is always aware of the moments when Steve is struggling to collect himself, to push back down his gut-reactions to the ugliness Billy can't help but drag home sometimes.

Billy knows.

He's stayed up himself on the nights when Steve couldn't sleep, watching while Steve painted or paced long into the morning hours, trying to drag himself out of his own dark place, his black whirlpool of self-loathing.

Better those nights than the days when Steve can't paint at all, when he struggles to get out of bed. Those times are the worst.

Billy doesn't blame Steve for his fears and frustrations. He understands all too well what Steve must see when he looks at Billy.

Steve loves Billy for some weird reason, and Billy is glad, but he also knows that he is oftentimes an ugly, wretched animal. That he is sometimes a very difficult thing to love.

For all his petty vanity Billy is not particularly fond of looking in a mirror and soul-searching.

Still, he can't help but be a little curious.

Steve draws all the time, and he draws everything he can. He draws friends and strangers, street corners and still life. Billy's even seen him sketch a series of cartoon doodles of the neighbor's cat.

Billy has never seen any drawings of himself.

He's sure that Steve sketches him. Well, 90% sure. Steve has his pencils out sometimes when they watch TV, when Billy works out or when it's his turn to cook. He doesn't always show Billy what he's up to, but every once in a while, Billy will catch Steve studying him, his gaze... not sharp, necessarily, and certainly not cruel, but considering.

Like he's taking measurements, almost. Evaluating.

Billy flips through half-finished canvases, completed projects, scraps and sketches. He's only half-dressed, barefoot with his pants on and shirt open, lounging around and waiting for Steve to get back from work. His lover was picking up pizza on the way, and then Billy had plans to completely unmake Steve Harrington and ruin his ugly, stained couch once and for all. It makes his dick twitch in interest to think about it.

Steve is always cagey when Billy brings up his sketches.

Why shouldn't he be? Billy doesn't doubt that Steve loves him, but it's got to be hard to make a monster like Billy Hargrove into a work of art. Might be beyond even Steve's skills.

He doesn't doubt Steve's love. Really, he doesn't.

What's not to love?

But Steve also isn't stupid... he sees people and there is no way he can turn what he must see in Billy into something beautiful. Into something pure and innocent and good.

No way.

He's not really being nosy, but he still opens up the folder when he finds it, tucked away safely behind some art supplies. A brown paper thing with the edges worn and curled.

Inside, sketch after sketch, in pencil, in charcoal. A few doodles in ballpoint pen. A few in wax crayon.

All of someone Billy has never seen.

All of someone who doesn't exist.

That's silly. Billy knows who this is, intellectually. He recognizes the hair, the cheekbones, the nose, the mouth. He's looked at a darker shadow of that face often enough. He's seen it in the mirror.

But still his heart drops. It drops because the Billy in these sketches doesn't exist.

Gentle smiles. Kind eyes. A face free of pain and worry. That spark of danger, of ferocity, of fire... but warmed and softened in these depictions. Reshaped into something like irrepressible freedom and poignant longing. Happiness. Contentment.

Page after page.

Portraits of a lover. Of a loved man. Of a human being.

Just yesterday Steve had needed to pull stitches out of Billy's side with a set of tweezers, the souvenir of a gunshot wound he received from a stubborn, now dearly departed 'businessman' who wouldn't fall in line.

That's who Billy is, not this.

This person Steve has sketched with such love and care and attention to detail is a fantasy.

This Billy is a dream.

When Steve comes through his front door he can immediately see that something is wrong.

Oh, for a casual observer the scene would be unremarkable, pleasant even. A partially clothed Adonis sitting on Steve's worn old couch, sipping scotch and flipping through charcoal and paper pictures. Nothing wrong about that.

But Steve knows Billy pretty well by now. He knows that Billy never sits that still.

“Hey,” he says, quietly but clearly, dropping his keys and the pizza on his kitchenette counter. “I got pepperoni and mushroom. You been waiting long?”

Billy doesn't answer right away. He looks up at Steve briefly, blinks, and then gives a single shake of his head.

Steve zeros in on the sketches in Billy's hands. His lips twitch up slightly. He hasn't been hiding them – he's rather proud of them, actually. He's glad Billy found them. But then, looking at Billy's face, doubt fills him. Does Billy not like them? He doesn't look particularly enthusiastic. He looks a little sad, a little angry, and also strangely blank.

The old sensitivities and insecurities are sparked within him and his grin fades.

“They're... ah... they're just sketches. Not finished. I wasn't... I...”

“They're beautiful, Steve,” Billy says hoarsely. “They're beautiful.”

“Yeah?” Something inside Steve eases and he moves over to the couch. “You're tough to capture, you know? Your expression changes a lot. That's why there are so many different sketches, by the way... not because I'm an obsessive stalker. Sorry I didn't ask permission or... I know there are a lot of them but I am kind of hooked on you, babe, so maybe I'm a little bit... I'm just going to stop talking before I say something stupid or accidentally creepy. But yeah, you're, like, sex on wheels, so its kind of hard to do that justice.”

Steve almost thinks that Billy has stopped listening until he's interrupted by a sharp laugh at that last remark... a laugh that sounds suspiciously like a sob.

“Sex on wheels,” Billy echoes hollowly, finally looking up to where Steve is standing on the other side of the coffee table, a weak grin on his face.

“You're beautiful,” Steve says. “The sketches. If they're any good, it's because you're beautiful.”

Billy shakes his head. “You're an amazing artist, Steve. You have a...

a vision.”

You make everything around you beautiful. Even things that aren't.

Even things that don't deserve it.

“Not just a pretty face,” Steve jokes weakly.

“No, sweetheart. You're the whole package.”

“Uh huh, you know you like my package.”

The dirty quip sails right past Billy, who is still staring at the sketches with something dangerously close to misery creeping in around his eyes.

It's silly, maybe. Steve knows there's nothing too shocking in the portfolio. The worst might be some intimate sketches of Billy's body, but there's nothing below the waist... honestly, Billy is shirtless so often it hardly seems like that'd be a problem. Mostly the pages in the folder are sketches of Billy watching TV, his brow furrowed and eyes focused, or his face relaxed in a smile. His lovely profile. A few close ups of his eyes or mouth. One or two of Billy asleep, napping on the couch. Steve will even admit to a couple dedicated studies of Billy's shoulders and perfect ass, and to a cartoon doodle of his boyfriend bouncing down the road in his fancy car.

Steve doesn't know what to do. Billy seems shaken but he's not sure why. An idea occurs to him, but it's a scary one. He bites his lip and makes a snap decision before his doubts can overcome him.

“They're not finished...”

“It's fine, babe, they're...”

“No, wait. I've been working on something more... um... more serious. Been working on it for a while. I've pretty much finished it, but I could use your help. Please? I've gotten about as much done as I can without... without you being here.”

This does draw Billy out of his funk a little. He looks up at Steve and tilts his head in a question.

Steve nods, pulls off his jacket and moves over to his easel. He turns it so that he's facing Billy and the couch. Rolling up his sleeves, he ducks into a closet (where he *has* been hiding something) and pulls out a half-finished canvas. Billy can't see what's on it. He watches as Steve props it up on the easel and starts mixing and arranging his paints on his palette, oblivious to the colors getting on his hands and his shirt.

The pizza is completely forgotten.

"You painted me?" Billy asks quietly.

"Started when we got together for real. It's been good... helps me think. Process things. Can only do so much from memory, though," Steve gives him a small grin.

"Can I see it?" Billy asks, although part of him is unsure if he really wants to.

"When I'm finished. Will you sit for me? Maybe an hour, give or take?"

"What do you want me to do?" Billy's hands twitch where they rest on his knees, and his eyes dart away with sudden self-consciousness.

"Just be yourself," Steve says, simply, his gaze meeting Billy's.

Just be yourself.

Billy isn't sure he wants to do that. Some days he feels like so many different people, some good, some bad. None of them are worthy of Steve.

And yet, once again, Steve steamrolls over all Billy's objections. He starts painting before Billy gets a chance to say no.

Silence falls in the apartment, broken only by the sound of the street outside and Steve's brush strokes and general clatter. Steve usually listens to music when he works but he feels like if he moves away from the canvas his subject might bolt out the door. He's got Billy pinned down now, and he needs to keep him on the couch until he can finish capturing him in paint.

Billy, meanwhile, seems to be struggling to compose himself. Needing to sit still - although Steve hadn't told him he couldn't move, he feels like it would be *wrong* to do so, somehow - is both a blessing and a curse. He hates sitting still, usually. It always reminds him of being stuck in his father's office, trapped under Neil's gaze. He was always closely examined and found wanting at those times, in those moments when he had to be still.

On the other hand, the stillness and silence forces him to get a grip, to settle. He can fix this, he realizes. Steve is living a pipe-dream. Steve sees him as a good guy.

Okay then. Billy will be a good guy. If it means keeping Steve, making Steve happy, Billy can try to be like the man in the sketches. Kind and gentle and funny and vulnerable.

"How was work?" Billy asks when he's sure he can keep his voice steady.

"Really good," Steve glances up with his old evaluating look and then glances down at the canvas. "Kids have gotten it into their head that the school boiler room is haunted so I've been having to chase them away from there all week, and today..."

Steve goes off on a rant and Billy makes himself listen, makes himself focus.

"How about you?" Steve asks after a little while.

"Same old," Billy says automatically, then swallows.

I promise I'll be better, he doesn't say. He wants to, though.

"Alright," Steve says, finally, after what feels like an eternity to Billy. His mouth is a firm line - satisfied.

"Alright," Billy echoes weakly after a moment.

Steve looks at him and doesn't say anything. Billy worries during moments like this, when Steve looks at him like that. Steve isn't always the quickest person, but he gets people. When he gives Billy that look Billy feels inescapably exposed. When Steve sees him, Billy

feels *seen*.

Steve holds out his hand, offering it to Billy. As Billy stands, he can see a slight tremor in it, and he knows that Steve is nervous to show his work. All this time and he is still afraid of criticism and rejection. Maybe even more so in this moment because Steve doesn't really know or care about what the Heidelberg Institute or the Ludwig Academy has to say about his art.

He does, however, care about what Billy thinks and feels.

He wants me to want him, to love and support him.

He wants me.

He loves me.

In spite of everything. *Because* of everything.

Cleaning up the bloody mess in the bathroom. Eating pizza and watching TV in Steve's shitty apartment. Drinking champagne and dancing into the early morning.

All of it.

Billy stands and walks over and lets his fingers wrap around Steve's, feels smooth skin and wet paint. He places a gentle kiss on Steve's mouth and turns to view the finished portrait.

Painted blue eyes matching his own look up at him from the canvas while chocolate brown ones study him, brimming with hope and contentment and trust.

"I love you," Steve says.

Steve sees me.

"I love you, too," Billy replies, something fragile and warm stirring and growing in his chest.

Notes for the Chapter:

All comments, kudos, and suggestions for one-shots are much loved and appreciated! Stay cool, my stardust people <3

9. Outtake #2 - Princess

Summary for the Chapter:

After a bad day at work Billy helps Steve get in touch with his femme side. Smut ensues.

Billy comes back to his apartment in a mood. He tries leaving his bad feelings in the office, and then he tries leaving them in the car, and then he tries leaving them on the doorstep of his penthouse. He wants to shake it all off before he gets home, but he can't quite manage it. The unpleasant mood hangs over him like a dark cloud – he is tense, on-edge, bordering on actually miserable.

Just one of those days.

Steve is already there when he gets in. He's on the floor of Billy's living room, his back against the couch, his papers from work fanned out on the coffee table in front of him. They've talked about this, or rather Billy has teased Steve about using furniture for its actual function and sitting on it rather than next to it, but Steve always just grins and insists that it's easier for him to organize his stuff if he is sitting on the floor and using the couch as a filing system.

Billy is torn between annoyance and fondness when he sees him there. He doesn't want any of his interactions with Steve to be tainted by his bad mood, but he can't seem to help it sometimes. He tries to ignore or bury his stress, but it always just resurfaces in stupid ways.

Steve smiles up at him from his perch.

"Hey."

"Hey," Billy gives Steve a small grin before dropping his keys and his wallet on a side table. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Good day?"

"Yeah, fine. Nothing big. You?"

"Fine."

How domestic, Billy thinks. Again, he's not quite sure if that irritates or pleases him. Usually his feelings are more straightforward, easy to negotiate, but he feels a bit muddled today, like he isn't fully there. Must be a full moon.

Steve, weirdly enough, seems to be thinking something similar. He huffs a little sigh from his place on the floor and idly fingers a soft plastic case that's lying on top of a stack of neglected papers. Billy eyes it with vague interest and goes to make himself a drink.

"I'm beat," he says. "Let's order out tonight."

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Thai?"

"Sure."

"What you got there?"

"Hmmm? Oh, a makeup kit. A couple fifth graders were screwing around during gym class. Carol confiscated it and asked me to take it. I didn't really want to throw it away, but I'm not sure what else to do with it."

"Carol's a real mega-bitch, huh?"

"She is not."

"Back when I was in school you didn't get your property taken away just because you had better things to do than learn to play badminton."

"Well... maybe. Anyway, don't let Tommy hear you say that. He's surprisingly protective. Though it's not that surprising, I guess."

"They've gone out twice!"

"They've been going out for a month now, Billy. Honestly."

Steve gives Billy a distracted half-grin and rolls a tube of lip gloss across the coffee table. Billy slips off his suit jacket, pours himself a

scotch, and wonders when his fast-paced world of blood and money and neon lights had been overtaken by domestic soap operas and petty grade-school drama.

"Why haven't you tossed it yet?" he asks, watching as Steve unscrews and examines a mascara brush.

"I will," Steve says, distractedly. "Feels like a waste is all." He sighs and puts the mascara down, tapping his fingers on the coffee table and eyeing the lip gloss. A stack of papers sits on the floor next to him, ready to be sorted and graded. He glances over at it, briefly, but doesn't move.

He should get on that. Dull and demoralizing busy-work, but it still needs to get done.

Billy studies him thoughtfully and then says, ever so casually, "It's a good color."

"Hmm?"

"The gloss. Dark red for pale skin. It's a good color."

Steve's eyes snap up and he gives Billy a sharp, searching look. Whatever he is looking for, he doesn't find it.

Billy, on the other hand, sees a strange glint in Steve's eyes and mentally confirms something he has already started to suspect.

"You think?" Steve asks warily, gaze still fixed on Billy.

"Yeah," Billy takes a sip of his drink.

"You know a lot about make-up, huh?"

"Sure. Da... Neil used to drop me off at the club when I was younger, when he didn't want to deal with me. Free babysitting. I'd watch the girls get dressed and ready to dance. They used to think it was sweet when I was interested, like I was a little club mascot. Showed me how to use most stuff. Dolled me up one time and Dad almost burned the place down afterwards."

Steve grimaces. "At least he's consistent."

Billy puts his drink down and walks over to Steve, rolling his sleeves up before kneeling next to him. Telegraphing his movements, he leans in and plants a chaste kiss on Steve's lips. He deepens the kiss slowly, with a gentle probing of his tongue, slipping past Steve's teeth to claim his mouth. He takes control with careful tenderness, utterly unhurried, and Steve lets a little moan escape.

Some of the tension they are both holding in their shoulders slips away. Billy feels a tug of lazy playfulness as he laps into Steve's eager mouth.

After a long moment Billy pulls away and props himself up on the edge of the coffee table. He carefully removes Steve's reading glasses, which had been sliding down to the end of his nose, folds them, and places them out of the way. He then picks up the container of liquid eyeliner and eyes it critically. He cups Steve's chin and pulls him close.

"Hold still."

Steve gives a sharp intake of breath, but he doesn't argue. He doesn't say a word. He just watches with his big, surprised, pleased eyes as Billy does his thing.

Billy is methodical, moving with practiced grace and surprising skill. He's very focused, but also appreciative of the canvas he is working with, a small smile tugging the corners of his mouth up in genuine pleasure. He applies mascara, though with Steve's long lashes he hardly needs it, just a splash of shimmering eye shadow and thick waves of eyeliner. A touch of foundation and blush. He brushes Steve's long hair out of the way, rubbing the strands fondly between his fingers.

"I didn't think you'd be into this," Steve says softly as Billy works on him.

"What about you?" Billy asks.

Steve doesn't answer right away.

"I... I've thought about it."

"You didn't say anything."

"I thought it might be a bit... much."

Billy narrows his eyes, a silent question.

"You're always kind of..." Steve struggles to find the right words. "You're not, like, some toxic lunatic or anything but you're a bit... macho. I know being 'out' is an adjustment for you, especially with what you do for a living. With your dad or whatever. I thought...I thought this might be a bit too much... like drag, almost. Thought it might be going too far."

Steve falls silent, embarrassed, and Billy is filled with his own frustration. He thought they were past the point where Steve felt ashamed of admitting his feelings, though he is man enough to admit that Steve isn't exactly wrong in his assessment. Being with Steve is amazing, but it has also been part of a long, complicated process of shaking off the chains Billy's father had methodically wrapped him in over the years. Sometimes Billy thinks a thing and then has to work really hard to figure out if it is his own thought or Neil's.

"You're my baby, though," Billy says after a moment, unable to hide the touch of hurt he feels. "There's nothing, nothing I'd deny you, nothing I wouldn't do..."

"I know," Steve interrupts. He chews his lower lip worriedly and Billy gives the corner of his mouth a careful little tug with his fingers to keep Steve from biting too hard. "I wasn't, like... desperate or pining for this or anything. I just... always want to be good for you. I don't want to be..."

Steve trails off but Billy can guess the ending of the sentence.

Desperate. Annoying. Aggressive. Needy.

But I need you, Steve. You're the only good thing I've got. I need you and I need you to need me.

Steve still looks worried, bordering on terribly upset at the thought

that he's hurt Billy, even if it was an accident. Can't have that. Billy gives him a small smile and leans forward, nuzzles his cheek softly, careful not to smudge anything. He rubs their noses together playfully before placing a sweet little kiss on the tip of Steve's nose.

Comfort. Forgiveness.

He can feel Steve relax and smile back, and suddenly Billy feels a small rush of anger at... at the world. Yeah, at the world... for making life difficult for lovers. For making it so hard for people to just *be*.

Because Billy also suspects that Steve's reluctance is about more than just the fear of displeasing Billy... it is also the fear of rejection.

That's the really upsetting thing.

There are so many things Billy and Steve do day in and day out that are designed to slowly and methodically kill their souls.

Don't they deserve a bit of freedom? Isn't that the goal, here, the reward for the daily grind of living? What's the point if he and Steve can't do whatever the hell they want with each other, if they both want it and it doesn't hurt anybody?

Steve deserves it all, deserves all the good things, and so does Billy. Fuck it.

"Today was awful," Billy says, finally. He continues applying the makeup while Steve focuses, perking up to listen to Billy share his struggles, share the special bits of himself he doesn't give to anyone else.

"Really fucking awful. I don't know what I'm going to do... except just... I dunno, keep slogging through the shit-swamp, I guess. There are all these factions. Within the organization. They aren't falling in line. I needed to break heads today and I hate doing it like this... with backstabbing and maneuvering and bullshit. People never say what they really mean, and I hate needing to second guess everything. Needing to demand respect constantly. Being in charge isn't all fun and games. Not that I thought it would be, but..."

Billy turns slightly and picks up the container of lip gloss. It really is a perfect color. It could have been made just for Steve.

"It's okay, though," he throws out a soft grin and steadies Steve with one tender touch on his cheek.

"It's okay because I get to come home to my beautiful baby-doll. He's perfect, so perfect, and he wants me to take care of him and make him feel good. I'm his tough, powerful daddy and he's my sweet boy. You should see him, man. He's got this gorgeous ass that looks like sin in tight jeans and panties, and soft, pale skin with moles that I want to eat up one by one, and..." Billy carefully applies the gloss to Steve's waiting lips, "a mouth made...and I do mean *made*... for giving pleasure."

Billy snaps the lip gloss tube shut again and motions for Steve to roll his lips together.

Steve obeys without hesitation, transfixed.

Billy is finished, his artwork complete.

Wide eyes and smooth cheeks and red, red lips.

Fucking gorgeous.

Billy cups Steve's face gently in his hands and holds his gaze.

"...And he's got beautiful eyes I want to drown in."

Steve's breath hitches and Billy can't restrain himself anymore. He ducks down to give those beautiful lips a kiss, but Steve pulls away suddenly before he makes contact. Billy is thrown for only a moment... Steve's hands go up and he gently rubs his fingers on Billy's wrists, assuring him that he hasn't overstepped. Steve then pulls back and stands in one fluid movement.

"Pour me a drink," he says breathlessly, and then moves off to the bedroom, his deft fingers quickly unbuttoning his shirt as he goes.

Billy lets out a long breath and obliges, standing and going over to his liquor cabinet to pour a small glass of the whiskey Steve prefers.

He idly runs his free hand down his chest and tries to steady his breathing. That Steve could ever doubt his own power, how securely he has Billy Hargrove, kingpin and playboy, wrapped around his finger, is a shame and a mystery. Fuck, what that sweet, beautiful man does to him... does without even trying...

“Billy...”

Billy turns. Steve is standing there, waiting for him.

He is wearing very little, yet at the same time so, so much... white silk stockings that go to mid-thigh and are held up by purple ribbons. He's wearing pair of panties Billy hasn't seen before, deep fuchsia-pink with ribbons and lace, and a thin ribbon circles his long neck, tied in a bow at the base of his throat. The makeup choices compliment him perfectly – the eyeliner, eye shadow, and mascara accentuate his wide chocolate-brown eyes and his lip color perfectly matches his lingerie.

He is unsure of what to do with his hands, so they flutter anxiously across his chest, calling attention to his exposed, erect nipples and flushed skin before folding themselves together just below his belly button.

In spite of his obvious nerves he settles after a brief moment and finally stands perfectly still and tall, with a sensual, self-possessed, almost defiant pride, and allows his lover to take the sight of him in.

He is utterly breathtaking.

“It's all fine,” Billy says as though he never stopped talking, walking over to Steve.

He hands Steve his drink and watches with a predator's gaze as Steve brings the glass to his lips and takes a demure sip, leaving a smudge of red on the rim. Steve never breaks eye contact with Billy as he does this, and Billy feels a thrum of ferocious, possessive pride coupled with desperate desire rip through his chest.

Billy's mouth spreads in a feral grin and he starts to walk in a circle around Steve, his eyes roving up and down and greedily consuming

in every inch of Steve's body. His fingers trace a barely-there path on Steve's skin as he circles him, going all the way around from Steve's belly to his back to his front again.

"All that outside shit doesn't matter. It's fine because my baby-doll is so good for me. He so fucking gorgeous, like a work of art, and he's all mine. He loves sucking my cock like it's candy and riding me until he's ready to cry from exhaustion. He lets me bend him over my desk and use him like a pretty toy, and when I want him inside me he takes me hard and tender and so, so fucking good."

Billy comes to a stop in front of Steve, who is still standing tall, reveling in this impromptu celebration of his own unique loveliness, and who is also struggling to breathe and hold in all his emotions.

"I'm the most powerful man in this city. I'm a prince," Billy gives Steve a Billy Hargrove™ smug smirk and takes his face in his hands again. He won't be denied his kiss this time.

"...And I've got my princess."

Steve groans into the kiss Billy claims, his sweet prize, his triumphant conquest.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Billy chants into Steve's mouth before demanding more with his lips and tongue. "You're so beautiful... you're everything... you're my angel, you're my doll, you're my princess, you're..."

Steve drops the glass he had forgotten he was holding, splashing whiskey all over the floor. Neither man pays the mess any mind because Steve has latched onto Billy's shirt and is pulling him quickly, frantically towards the bedroom.

"You're beautiful," Billy repeats whenever he resurfaces for air between kisses in those desperate moments as they move. "You're perfect... I need you... need to keep you... let me keep you... fucking gorgeous... keep you, need you, forever, please... so beautiful..."

They make it to the bed only by accident... they nearly collide with several bits of furniture and at least one door on the way, and finally

hit the bed only because they've run out of space to move. Unprepared, Steve falls backwards on the mattress and Billy lands on top of him. Neither of them stop kissing right away, but after a moment Billy takes it upon himself to pull them up and situate them more comfortably.

"I'm going to eat you out, baby," Billy murmurs, dragging his teeth down Steve's neck. "And then I'm going to fuck that sweet pussy of yours until you're fucking ruined."

"Yes... please..." Steve whimpers, rocking up against Billy. He can't seem to make his voice go any louder. "Billy..."

"Mine."

Billy releases Steve for a moment and then rolls over to stretch himself out on the bed.

"Up, sweetheart," he pats his chest and Steve quickly straddles him. As he settles himself comfortably on Billy's chest, Billy runs his hands up and down Steve's thighs, fingering the ribbons on his stockings and shaking his head.

"How could you ever think I wouldn't want this, Steve, sweetheart? I can't get enough of you at the best of times. You're beautiful. You're so fucking beautiful. You're beautiful when you're half-asleep and hungover, drooling and passed out at the kitchen table. You're beautiful when you're covered in silk and pearls and lipstick, moaning like a whore, looking like something from those old paintings you showed me. *Of course* I want you like this, any way I can get you. You're mine, you're mine... and I want..."

Steve gives a little panting groan and his hips twitch a bit, his eyes still fixed on Billy in wonder and relief and happiness. His groin hovering is right below Billy's neck, and Billy is looking up at him with joyous glee.

"My pretty baby-doll in his ribbons and silk," Billy's hand goes over Steve's panties, tracing the outline of his cock, and then up his chest, reaching up until he's plucking and rubbing Steve's nipples. "Look like a goddess with your makeup, baby... like a princess. A fucking

masterpiece. Eyes popping, lips glistening, looking like sex and sin and sweetness.”

Steve has forgotten how his vocal cords work, seduced as he is by Billy’s words and the way he weaves them in a smoky, sultry-seductive cocoon around them both. He’s more than willing to let Billy take the reins here, to be soothed and pampered and used like a little doll.

Steve’s not had a great day today either – nothing horrible happened, but it’d been a lot of the monotony and dreariness that sometimes spoils the joys of teaching. The relentless grind, the petty slights, the quiet desperation.

But Billy *wants* him. Billy *sees* Steve and not just the mask Steve presents to the world – sees him at his worst and sees him at his best and sees him dressed up in (*a long cherished vision, a dream unspoken and told to no one, not to (ex)lovers, not to family, not to friends... a special kind of ‘Steve’ kept on the shelf until the day a man came who could see and appreciate and love a Steve who wore lipstick and lace, a man who wouldn’t laugh at him, who wouldn’t think it was cheesy or stupid or offensive if Steve wanted... if Steve felt...*) silk and loves and cherishes and *wants* him no matter what.

Billy is looking at him like a delicious treat to be devoured, a special, favorite toy, an awe-inspiring deity to be treasured and worshiped, and when Billy nudges Steve up and encourages him to gently lower himself onto Billy’s face, Steve willingly obliges.

Billy takes his time. He wants Steve to know how much he appreciates the shy teacher going out and purchasing his outfit, dreaming it up and planning it out and keeping it in the back of the closet and saving it for Billy – *just for me, mine, my sweet baby, my heartbreakingly beautiful love.*

He mouths at Steve’s genitals through the silk panties, darkening the pink with the damp heat of his mouth, feeling the heavy, promising weight of Steve’s erect and straining cock, his soft balls, the opening crack behind them. Steve lets out a breathy little moan and shifts a little, but Billy wraps his hands around Steve’s thighs and holds him still. He runs his hands soothingly against Steve’s skin, but he doesn’t

relent his exploration, his nuzzling.

His fingers find the edge of the panties and pull them down a bit, slowly, teasing Steve with the promise of even more pleasure. He doesn't want to take his mouth away for even a moment, but he lets up enough to pull the panties down and out of the way and to shift Steve up and forward so he can get to the tender skin more easily.

He finally has proper access to Steve's hole now, and he doesn't hesitate. Steve is a bit uncomfortable with performing this kind of act (Billy thinks it might be a hangover from his constant battle against germs at school), and that's fine, but Billy isn't at all reluctant. Quite the opposite, in fact. Billy is all about the raw sensations, the baser, earthy experiences, and Steve's musky flavor on his tongue intrigues and delights him to no end, much to Steve's bemusement.

He drags his tongue over Steve's hole in a long, deliberate motion. Steve leans back, and hisses in pleasure, and Billy takes that as his cue to start paying dedicated attention to wetting and relaxing the tender, pink pucker. He teases the rim with slurping, lewd laps of his lips and tongue, and it twitches and loosens delightfully under the attention. Steve whines above him and Billy rubs his hands over Steve's thighs and ass again, gentling him, before thrusting his tongue into his waiting hole.

Steve lets out a breathy keener. It's so good and he can't quite stay still. He tries very hard, but he can't help riding Billy's mouth a little, clenching and following Billy's tongue when it moves in and out. Billy feels heady joy as he tastes deeply of Steve, pulling strained noises out of his eager lover, going deeper and deeper until all that sweet flesh and relaxing muscle is claimed, is his.

Steve's breath comes out in little hiccuping cries and he can feel himself start to sweat and tear up. Billy lets out a moan against Steve's hole that can only be described as worshipful, and the sounds nearly send Steve right over the edge. A little precum squirts out of his dick and Steve wraps his long fingers around his length.

"Bi...Billy... neughh... Billy... B-Billy... Billy..."

Billy draws his tongue up and his head back and sucks Steve's balls

into his mouth and just like that, without any warning at all, Steve cums wildly, ejaculate shooting over Billy's head and across the bed. Billy releases Steve's sac quickly before Steve hurts himself and allows his lover to lift himself up as he cums, thrusting frantically into thin air and crying out, shocked and half out of control. As cum spurts out Steve's cry tapers off into low whine, and he hiccups a little as his orgasm plays out, whimpering weakly.

"Sorry, m'sorry..."

"Shhhh," Billy is up in a second, sliding out from under Steve and then kneeling behind him, pushing himself up against Steve's back and reaching around to massage his still dribbling dick. "Shhh, baby, that's good, that's good... good baby, cumming like that. I got you, sweetheart, it's okay..."

"Sorry... didn't mean to..." Steve gasps. It's surprise, mostly, and it's thrown him for a loop... he's shuddering and almost feels like crying. So much, so much, Billy always gives him so much... a little overwhelming. Billy holds him tight against his chest and rocks him, peppering his neck and shoulder with kisses, soothing him and helping him come back down.

"It's okay pretty baby, I got you," Billy runs a hand down Steve's cheek. "You did good, baby... taking the edge off before I fuck you. Want you to cum on my dick, baby... 'm glad you came so you can relax and be good for me now. Such a beautiful little slut, cumming just like that from me tongue-fucking you. So beautiful when you cum. You like my mouth on you, baby?"

"Yeah, love your mouth... fucking me..." Steve is relaxing into it now that he knows it's all okay. He's floating, blissed, and when Billy sees this he can't resist. He is struck by a wave of possessiveness that is almost overwhelming, an almost violent urge to claim and own the other man completely. He turns Steve's head and presses a kiss to those gorgeous, glossy red lips, lapping into Steve's mouth so Steve can taste himself. Steve moans and returns the kiss, his tongue demanding more, tears squeezing out of his closed eyes.

Begging to be devoured.

“Tongue-fucked you, baby,” Billy grins, pulling away, the wheels in his head already turning, already mapping out ways to further secure his conquest. “Need to open you a bit more for me, now.”

Steve’s eyes clear and focus on Billy as the words break through the fog. He sees the possessive lust and sheer want in Billy’s eyes and feels his own soul rise to meet it. Yes, he wants it. Oh, how he wants it. A small, sly smile creeps onto his face and in a slinking, fluid movement Steve stretches out across the bed on shaking hands and knees, back arched and hips hitched up in an offering.

Billy swears violently and swiftly removes his clothes, almost tearing off his socks, his pants, his shirt. Steve licks his lips and pants with need, and Billy is suddenly very painfully aware of his own neglected erection.

Fuck, does Steve even *know* how good he looks... is he doing this on *purpose*?

The glint in Steve’s eye suggests that the answer is yes... maybe just a little.

Determined not to rush, no matter how desperately he wants to feel some friction on his cock, Billy retrieves the lube from the bedside dresser and coats his fingers. With very little preamble he places on hand on Steve’s tantalizing hips and presses two fingers against Steve’s already wet and loosened hole.

Steve hisses a little at the burn but the fingers slide in relatively smoothly and he relaxes almost immediately around them, body lax and welcoming the intrusion. Billy works him open quickly, but with care, giving Steve’s refractory period a moment to catch up. Soon enough, Steve is pushing back against his hand, desperate for more, for Billy to go harder and deeper. Billy obliges as best he can with his fingers, but it’s not enough for either of them and they know it. Steve hadn’t quite realized how much he wanted Billy *inside*, but he realizes it now, wants to surrender his control to the overwhelming force of his lover.

“Ready, Steve?” Billy asks quietly, finally. At Billy’s question they both still, held for a moment in a hovering, fragile, inescapable

bubble of their own need for each other. The momentary silence as they both breath in and out and in and out again is beautiful, pregnant with possibility. But it will be Steve (and for all Billy's power and control, he knows that it is and must be Steve, breathtaking, beautiful Steve, who decides) who breaks (or begins) the spell.

"Yes, Billy," Steve says, voice heavy with emotion. He throws a glance over his shoulder, his makeup smudged but still utterly striking.

"Fuck me."

Billy needs no further encouragement.

He starts off gently, entering Steve with one slow, fluid movement before stilling to give them both a chance to collect themselves and adjust to the sensation, the stretch. Billy is so desperate that he fears he might cum right then and there, but he doesn't... through sheer willpower, he doesn't. He makes himself breathe. When he moves again it is with slow deliberate thrusts that go deep. Each movement inspires a moan from both of them in tandem, and Billy bends over and presses his face to Steve's back, sighing heavily.

"God..." he murmurs, and Steve hums in agreement.

Billy takes a deep breath in and his hips pick up speed, snapping against Steve's ass with a little more force now, more quickness. Steve feels it and huffs an approving moan, murmurs an affirmation.

"Yeah... nuh, yes... please... Billy...nuh... nuh... ohhh... ahhh..."

"Got you, princess," Billy pulls back and begins laying claim to Steve in earnest, building up a steady pace. The sound of Billy's balls and hips slapping against Steve's skin is a lewd punctuation to their shared song. It feels so desperately good to be pounding into Steve's tight, sinful heat, the both of them losing more and more control with every thrust. Steve is sent jerking forward with Billy's every ferocious moment, scrambling against the sheets to gain some kind of purchase. It is a losing battle - Billy holding on to his hips with his hands is the only thing keeping him fully anchored.

Billy finds Steve's prostate and hits it with precision, and soon Steve's moans turn into loud sobs of pleasure. He looks down to see the muscles in Steve's back rippling, his head tilting back and then lolling forward, his fingers white and clenching the sheets, Billy's cock disappearing and reappearing, sleek and red, as he pistons fast into that stretched, hungry, eager hole.

"Yes, yes, yes, nuh, nuh, yah..."

"Fuck... Steve."

Billy wants to see his princess, wants to flip him over so he can see his face, but then he catches sight of something out of the corner of his eye and he lets out a noise between a chuckle and a groan.

He stops and shifts them slightly and Steve makes a noise of protest, but Billy soon picks up his rhythm again and murmurs softly, rubbing Steve's back before returning his hands to his hips and snapping forward into Steve's ass.

"Look at yourself, baby," Billy reaches up and gives Steve's hair a gentle tug and Steve's eyes shoot up to gaze at the full-length mirror on the door of the closet across from the bed.

Billy doesn't stop his thrusts as he forces Steve's head up further, making him arch his back and grunt with pleasure. The barely-there pain of Billy's hand pulling his hair helps Steve bring the world back into focus, and he fixes his eyes on the mirror and sees what Billy is showing him.

The two of them, the embodiment of love-making in motion, Billy taking him relentlessly from behind while Steve submits on his hands and knees, mouth open and eyes hazy with overwhelming pleasure, and every inch of him, from his painted face to his long, shaking limbs to his bouncing, red cock, on glorious display.

He looks like the dictionary definition of 'wrecked'.

His mascara is running down his face, ruined by his sweat and his tears. He has smeared or chewed off most of the lip gloss, and a streak of sticky red is slashed across the bottom of one cheek. His

ribbon is still in place around his neck, but his panties are in tatters around his knees and, while one stocking is still up, the other has been torn and pushed down to his calf.

Billy's hips never stop moving, slamming into Steve with a controlled violence that makes Steve jerk and bounce forward, makes every expression on his face flutter with effort and pleasure and intensity. Billy keeps his hand in Steve's hair as they watch themselves in the mirror, Billy's eyes blown with lust and his whole face shining with something that looks suspiciously like awe.

"Pretty boy," Billy chokes out, eyes roll back in pleasure, thrusting forward again and again and again, taking and giving and needing and wanting and loving. "My beautiful princess. Take a look at yourself."

Steve looks.

He reaches back and guides one of Billy's hands down from his hip to his cock, wraps it around his member and rides the cresting wave as Billy brings him to his peak.

He watches, panting and desperate and utterly fulfilled, as Billy pounds his ass and twists his hand around Steve's dick, sending liquid fire through every inch of Steve's body.

He watches as Billy's eyelids flutter with sensation, his glorious body straining with effort, the pressure of his fingers bruising Steve's skin as he embraces the extraordinary depths of his obvious and unashamed desire.

He watches as sweat and tears roll down his face, ruining Billy's work, the cheap makeup dripping in dark streaks of black and gold and red.

Ruined.

Precious.

Billy's.

Steve opens his mouth and wails as he cums.

Afterwards

Steve is nothing if not tenacious, especially when he discovers something he loves. His YouTube watch-list is quickly filled with makeup tutorials, and he teaches himself to use these new tools, practicing with the unwavering dedication he shows in all aspects of his life.

He is thus more than ready, when Billy comes home one day a few weeks later, to return the favor Billy so kindly granted him on that first, ordinary, perfect afternoon.

As he applies the golden eye shadow he chose specially for the occasion to Billy's eyelids, he thinks that his lover's baby-blue eyes, swimming with contentment and acceptance and pleasure, have never looked more beautiful.

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh my God, you guys... I have actually work to do, I'm trying to write a completely separate werewolf AU... and what am I doing with my time instead? That's right, writing self-indulgent femme-Steve smut for an already complete story. When did this become my way of de-stressing? Anyway, enjoy it you crazy cats! Death to toxic heteronormativity!

Please comment and let me know what you think <3